

## **Did God Kill Jesus? Part I**

2 Thessalonians 2:13-17 by Patty Friesen (Nov.6/16)

Our letter from Paul this morning highlights a few things about God and Jesus that we are beloved by God, and that God chose us and called us through the good news of Jesus. And God who loved us and gives us grace, comfort and good hope, comforts our hearts and strengthens them in every good work.

This is the gospel in a nutshell, and I'd like to pull together this love center of the gospel and our conversations this fall about communion and grace and salvation and what Jesus' life and death and resurrection means to us. It is so interesting that this love center that Paul talks about seems to be the ongoing struggle for we Christians in general and Mennonites in particular. Despite the fact that we learn as children that God is love and Jesus loves me, we seem to have a hard time claiming that reality as youth and adults. Our conversations around baptism raise comments like "I'm not ready or I don't feel worthy and our conversations around membership raise comments like, I'm not sure I'll be accepted if I have doubts or if I've been divorced." It kills me, because we work hard at being a welcoming community of peace and they will know we are Christians by our love but it appears that we still don't quite feel God's love and acceptance within.

One of the books that the Mennonite seminary in Indiana suggested I make Zachary read this summer is *Did God Kill Jesus?* by Tony Jones. He never got to it because I made him read a bunch of other stuff, but I read it and Tony Jones says that while the Bible and Christianity tell us that Jesus' death is all about love, today's understandings of the cross leave us feeling guilty, ashamed, even unlovable and thus disinclined to love others. How did we get from the Bible's assurance that God loved us

while we were still sinners to becoming sinners in the hands of an angry God. Jones argues it shouldn't surprise us then, that Christians feel guilty and unlovable, the very things the cross was meant to remedy.

I think we Mennos haven't always known what to do with the cross. Our ancestors focused on the Sermon on the Mount and living our lives like Jesus lived his life. Our connection to the cross has always been that if we live like Jesus, we might die like Jesus because there is a cost to this status challenging, love-risking way of living. Our ancestors never really linked the cross to sin, but linked it to the cost of discipleship. But somewhere along the line, through traveling evangelists or TV evangelists or whomever, we've all been exposed to hell-fire and brimstone and that Jesus' death is somehow linked to my personal failings and inadequacies and if I have any hope of heaven, I better turn my life over to Jesus because he died for it and he can manage my life much better than I can. That's a psychological/spiritual heavy that affects one for the rest of one's life and it feels like most of my own spiritual work in finding God's love for me is spent undoing that kind of theology. I'd like to spend these next 2 sermons reconstructing an understanding of Jesus' death that places back within the context of his life and resurrection and the context of God's intention for Jesus in the first place.

(I have in my notes to take a deep breath here and launch in!) Some of this blood sacrifice stuff that we put on Jesus, comes from the Old Testament and Terri Lynn and I are learning that all the ancient peoples offered human and animal sacrifices before the Bible was even written. There was something about ancient people's relationship to God and their desire to worship God with their most valueable possessions, their animals and their children. When God called Abraham and Sarah and the people of Israel, he put laws

abolished human sacrifice and put laws around animal sacrifices – that they only occur 3 times a year in the temple and that the meat was not wasted but eaten with thanksgiving. Sacrifices to God were about thanksgiving and joy and appreciation, not appeasement and payment for anger. And by the time we get to the prophets, God says, “Do you think I’m pleased with your sacrifices? No, what I want is to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.”

The Old Testament is important for setting the stage through the prophets about what kind of prophet Saviour Jesus would be. One who in Luke 4, fulfills Micah 6 by reading the words of the prophet saying, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour. Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

This claim drove the religious leaders wild and from then on, they plotted to kill him. This is how we understand Jesus death, as the consequences of this kind of preaching and the kind of actions he performed. We have four gospels that focus on the life and teachings of Christ, and only two focus on his birth – yet we spend so much time in the Christian calendar on Jesus’ birth. All four gospels also focus on his death and all agree that Jesus died. He died on a cross, the instrument of torture and capital punishment of the Roman empire and he died at the provocation of his religious colleagues. And at his death, the disciples hopes for an earthly messiah were dashed but through his resurrection, his death became an event of unparalleled importance. As reported by three of the four gospels, Jesus appeared to his followers in the days and weeks following his death, inciting them to interpret his death differently than every other

crucifixion they had witnessed. The disciples began to understand his death cosmically and theologically. They began to see his death as an act of God.

The gospel writers tie Jesus' death to Passover, the key Old Testament story of deliverance from slavery. They don't tie Jesus' death to an angry God who needs appeasement but to the God with his people in Israel who asked them to eat a meal in preparation to flee Egypt that night. Like the original Passover lamb meal, God saved Israel from Egypt, a physical, political bondage, not from their spiritual sins as such, and through Jesus, the Passover lamb, God saves all humanity for all time from whatever bondage we're in, physical, addictive, spiritual, political.

Apostle Paul takes the crucifixion to another level, and shapes our view of Jesus' death probably even more than the gospels do. Paul never met Jesus, never saw a miracle, heard a sermon or witnessed the crucifixion himself. Paul's experience of the resurrected Jesus came on the road to Damascus and completely turned his life around from persecuting Christians to becoming one himself. Paul is an amazing thinker and he didn't turn his back on Judaism. He wanted to pull together Jesus and the Old Testament. For Paul, the cross is everything and it's what he writes most about, rather than the life of Christ. In the book of Romans in particular, Paul establishes that the Old Testament laws showed us that we could never on our own live up to being God's people. Only Jesus has the power to transform Paul's life and ours through the giant reset button of the crucifixion where everything is rejigged and made new. This doesn't mean that Jesus died because of sin but it means that sin is endemic to the human condition and Jesus died to vanquish all of it.

Paul introduces an interpretation of Jesus' death that we didn't see in the Gospels. For the writers of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the death of Jesus was seen exclusively through the lens of the Passover experience – the Messiah leading the people into liberation. While Paul acknowledges this, he also introduces the idea the Jesus was not only the liberator but the sacrifice also to cleanse sin. And Paul stresses individual human sin as making Jesus' sacrifice necessary, an idea that is absent from the Gospels.

And for Paul, it wasn't the theology – why Jesus died that was even as important as what should come as a result of his death – the ethics of how his disciples should live. Paul wanted Christians to live out the example that God set on the cross in Philippians 2: the self-offering, humility and submission of Jesus is the lesson we as Christians should learn. Let this same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Paul's interpretation that Christians should sacrifice themselves as Christ sacrificed himself has been an effective teaching. It has helped Christians in persecution since Roman times and it helped our ancestors through persecution during the Reformation in Europe in the 1500's, and for Mennonites fleeing Ukraine and Russia 100 years ago. And with the self-sacrifice has always been the hope and confidence of deliverance as well, of being led out of persecution to the Promised Land, a land of safety and peaceful living, whether than was heaven or Canada.

Let us pray...