

Why I've come back around to substitutionary atonement

Sometimes sacrifice is an act of love.

by [Martha Tatarnic](#) in the [March 24, 2021](#) issue



Cross (ca. 1180, Limoges, France) Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY

I tried to explain atonement theology to my brother when we were both teenagers. I talked about sin, and I explained what I thought I understood from the Hebrew scriptures: “Only a sacrifice to God makes us right again,” I said. Then I plunged on with excitement about Jesus: “But instead of us having to pay that price ourselves, Jesus made the sacrifice instead. Once and for all. For all of our sins. Now, because of him, we’re right with God.”

I knew as the words were coming out of my mouth that they weren’t landing. I knew that I was missing something really important in how I had interpreted Jesus’ sacrifice. I felt dumber and dumber as Andrew, showing little to no interest in what I had just said, toppled my evangelical offering with a few disdainful words. “That doesn’t make any sense,” he said, after he let me fizzle out. “God sounds really terrible. Why would God need sacrifice? And why would God’s son be the kind of sacrifice he wants?”

My brother's response will sound familiar to many readers. He was articulating a conclusion at which many others have also arrived. As Andrew immediately saw, our casual Christian talk—and our passionate singing of some of our favorite barn burner hymns—makes it sound as if God is the ultimate abusive parent, unyielding in his divine scorecard that he will not allow to be settled in any way other than sacrifice, who then “sends his son” to pay the debt with blood and death.

Substitutionary atonement—the idea that Jesus died in our place or to pay the price of sin—may have been what my teenage self thought I knew about Jesus' death, but I soon realized that there were many other options open to me for understanding the meaning of the cross. We can see in the cross God's offer of faithful companionship, from which not even death can separate us. We can see in Jesus all of the brokenness of the world lifted up on that cross and hear Jesus' words of forgiveness spoken over us all. We can emphasize that the story doesn't end with Jesus' death, that God responds by making the grave a pathway to life, that Jesus' death and resurrection extend to us a share in God's victory over hatred, fear, and death. We can reject substitutionary atonement in favor of other interpretations of the cross.

But *does* the mainline church reject it? At my church, my parishioners by and large speak with ease about how Jesus “paid the price for my sin.”

I have wondered why this is, why my parishioners embrace a teaching with which I and so many of my fellow church leaders have had so much trouble. Is it just an impressive example of indoctrination? Is this teaching so much a part of the music and words that are all over our Christian culture that people just absorb it by osmosis?

We can reject substitution in favor of other atonement theories. But *do* we?

While this may be a factor, I have come to suspect that there is something else going on here, too. I have been exceedingly blessed in ministry by paying attention to the faith of my fellow Christians. One thing I have realized is that it *means* something to understand Jesus' death as paying off one's debt of sin. When I tried to explain to my brother why this matters, I did so as someone who felt passionately that it mattered *to me*, that Jesus' death addressed the cost of *my* sin. The fact that I couldn't adequately explain why it mattered led me to doubt that experience. But all across our congregations, I see people deeply, genuinely invested in this particular version of Christian teaching. This is connected in a real way to something that they

know about sin, something that they know about their personal relationship with God, and—maybe most importantly—something that they know about the power of self-sacrificial love, which they have seen and experienced in their own lives.

We know from our own human experience that it costs something to absorb someone else's debt. This can be considered in a very transactional way. A friend makes an error that costs me \$2,000. I can go after that friend for the money, or I can forgive the error. If I choose to forgive it, that leaves me with \$2,000 less in my bank account. I have to be willing to take on that loss in order to make the other person's debt right. "To offer forgiveness," writes theologian Justyn Terry, "is to be willing that something that was owed to me is owed to me no more. What I was entitled to get back, I relinquish, so that the debt of the other is now my loss. Their problem is now my problem, which is an act of substitution. That is the nature of forgiveness."

Of course, we don't owe God money. The walls that we put up in our relationship with God can happen for a whole lot of reasons, and the cost for God to bring those walls down and draw us close again can't be boiled down to a mere number.

My parish suffered a terrible loss in 2018. Rob Fead, our beloved former rector, was killed by a reckless driver while out on his motorcycle on a Monday afternoon. The hurt and heartbreak across the churches where Rob had served were bottomless. And nobody was more devastated than Rob's wife, Veronica. In an article in our local paper, she offered these anguished words: "I feel like, mostly, I have died and they forgot to bury me. My life without Rob is devoid of hope."

And yet, when it came time for victim impact statements and the sentencing of the young man whose actions had killed Rob, Veronica asked for a sentence that didn't involve jail time. "Rob was a man of mercy and compassion," she said. She asked that the perpetrator "honor her husband's memory by committing to helping others in his community" instead. Her words led to the prosecution and defense jointly requesting a conditional sentence—one served in the community—instead of a jail sentence. The defendant received a two-year conditional sentence.

Ethnographer Ella Deloria describes a community coming together to sentence a young murderer. Their sentence was carefully considered according to the resources of their collective Sioux wisdom. They could lock him up for the rest of his life or even seek capital punishment for his crime, and these options would be considered

entirely just. Instead, they arrived at a different sentence. The young murderer would become a part of the family that had lost the son. Deloria quotes an elder from the victim's community:

Smoke now with these your new relatives, for they have chosen to take you to themselves in place of one who is not here. It is their heart's wish that henceforth you shall be one of them; you shall go out and come in without fear. Be confident that their love and compassion which were his are now yours forever!

"He had been trapped by loving kinship," writes Deloria, "and you can be sure that he made an even better relative than many who are related by blood, because he had been bought at such a price."

These examples describe the cost of forgiveness, which generally is not quantifiable. Our experience of sin rarely, if ever, involves a numerical debt; it involves a tearing of relationship, a breaking of the heart, a burden of anger and sadness and fear and powerlessness. The act of reaching out across the chasm of our broken hearts in order to make a torn relationship right again involves a significant cost.

And the impact of Veronica or the Sioux community channeling loss and anger and grief into actions of love and compassion is potentially life changing. It puts a halt to the endless rabbit holes of anger and retribution that we might be tempted to go down. It communicates to a person who has ruined not only the lives of others but probably their own life as well that they are still worthy of love, care, dignity, and a next chance. It allows the possibility of an outcome other than further ruin.

Sin means separation from God. The word refers to choices that individuals make to turn from God's love. But it also refers to the more systemic brokenness of our human lives that leads us collectively to choose something less than God's rule of love. Just as we know that forgiveness is costly, so also we know that human sin can invite, or even demand, sacrifice in response.

We know forgiveness is costly. We also know that sin can demand sacrifice in response.

We know that those systems of injustice that most dramatically reveal the depth of our human brokenness are propagated by the enforced sacrifice of others. Through

no choice of their own, sacrifice is demanded of sweatshop laborers, of developing countries bearing the ravages of wealthy nations' carbon footprint, of minorities in North America incarcerated at disproportionately high rates as the visible scapegoat for our unwillingness to address poverty and systemic racism, of our Indigenous communities' lives on reservations that don't even provide the basic necessities of life while the rest of us live on their unceded lands. These sacrifices become so baked into our collective concept of business as usual that only repentance—hearing and heeding the call to look again and to turn toward another way—can begin to break those injustices.

We also know how individuals can choose to put themselves in harm's way for the sake of others. We know the courage with which Underground Railroad workers, Nazi resisters, and civil rights activists risked their lives in opposition to gross injustices. Malala Yousafzai took a bullet to the head to claim the right for women to be educated. All across our world, health-care workers and grocery store clerks put themselves in harm's way to combat COVID-19 on our behalf and make sure we can eat. The recent Margaret Atwood book *The Testaments* details the dangerous work of one woman on the inside of a tyrannical regime to bring it down. And we continue to line up in droves to see the musical production of *Les Misérables*, in which a group of idealistic university students falls on the barricades of France. Even when they know that the people are not rising up to join their fight, they lay down their lives in the hope that “others will rise to take our place, until the earth is free!”

We know of parents, lovers, and friends who will choose to run into raging waters, dash into burning buildings, or jump in front of a bullet in order to save the life of one that they love.

In every instance, the sacrifice that is offered is done so ultimately because there is a price for human sin. Terror, death, injustice, and human frailty mark our human experience. The enforced sacrifice of others can be used to prop up that brokenness. And sometimes one willing act of sacrifice can reveal injustice, topple tyranny, and buy new life for others.

I'm convinced that the popularity of substitutionary atonement persists not because of indoctrination but because of experience. Our human lives are remarkably in tune with its basic premises, that God's forgiveness comes at a cost and that one person's willing sacrifice could address the price of sin.

Where the language that Christians use gets confused is when we imagine God as the demanding parent who is somehow satisfied by his son's death. Anything that we say about atonement only makes sense in the context of what we also say about the Trinity. Jesus is not separate from God but part of the life of God. The suffering and death of Jesus are not something that God does to Jesus or even something God allows to happen to Jesus. Jesus' suffering is God's suffering. Jesus' death is God's death.

Our Christian understanding of the Trinity is also tied to Genesis 1, in which God creates humankind in God's own image. The relationship at the heart of God is a relationship that is stamped onto our souls. This doesn't just mean that we can understand on a very experiential level what Jesus' sacrifice was all about. It means that we can participate in that sacrifice, too.

We know something, deep in our souls, about how we also have the capability stamped onto our very beings to be able to love in a way that bears the cost of human brokenness. In contrast to our instincts for self-promotion and self-preservation comes this senseless, breathtaking capacity for us to pour out our own lives for the sake of saving another's life or making a new kind of world possible. We understand what Jesus did for us in part because that life of God already at work within us—our sharing in the image and likeness of God—allows us to recognize something of our own receiving of, and participating in, this kind of love.

Jesus died because he angered the powers of his day by refusing to accept that the dignity of and provision for any of God's people could be discarded as simply the cost of doing business. Jesus died to lay bare the injustice of his world, the all too easy sin of assigning sacrifice to the poor so that the rich can flourish.

Jesus died as an act of love for his undeserving, perpetually confused friends. Jesus died for the people he served, because he would not be cowed from pursuing justice for them, even if it enraged the powerful of his day.

Jesus died for the powerful, to allow "those who think they see to become blind," for those who sold their souls to the idol of power, who insisted with every fiber of their being that it was Jesus who was the problem, to be able to surrender their broken lives to God's love, too.

Jesus died for worlds he couldn't have imagined and for people he never knew. The onetime activity of God continues to matter, continues to be offered, because of the

Holy Spirit. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus' friendship and sacrifice continues to be extended to us.

All of those years ago, I tried to tell my brother why Jesus mattered to me, and I ended up amateurishly parroting back church doctrine instead. What I was really trying to express was an experience of truth that I couldn't deny and couldn't keep to myself.

I felt that telling catch in the back of my throat when I considered Jesus' death as a deliberate offering in response to human sin. I understood in a very visceral way that this sacrificial act was in response to me, too—that my strivings and my failings and my personal emptiness all mattered, mattered consequentially and sacrificially and infinitely, to God. That God was reaching out to me in love, and even though I couldn't see how to solve the emptiness or how to be enough, that there was a hand that was committed to clasping mine and never letting go, and there was the gift of life that was offered even though I would have never dared to ask.

Jesus died for me. Jesus is the embodiment of a personal relationship with God. The Holy Spirit's power also means that Jesus' death seeks me out in all of the places I get lost, stuck, or willfully off track. I come back to a teaching I so easily rejected because I actually know what this kind of love looks like. The image of God's sacrificial love is written on my heart, too.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "When love looks like sacrifice."