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“Atonement”

A Sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

Ezekiel 37:1-14, Ephesians 2:1-10, John 13:1-10a, 12-17, 34-35

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There are a number of annual rituals in our home, not all of them have to do with basketball. One of them is watching the Academy Awards. Carlisle and I don't see a lot of motion pictures because of our schedules. Usually on the list nominated for Best Picture, there is a least one we have seen. Then we extend our list of movies to be seen to include Academy Award winners.

This year our favorite was Atonement. You can imagine I was attracted by the title. It is a movie that I recommend, the cinematography is outstanding and the plot is provocative.

Atonement is based on Ian McEwan's superb novel, is about betrayal, guilt, and atonement. You have to see the movie (or read the book) to decide whether there is any atonement, or whether Ian McEwan is suggesting the very opposite: that in this life, whenever there is betrayal, there is just guilt and remorse, no atonement.

The story is set in an English country estate in 1935. An era is ending. Something new and terrible is in the air as Nazi Germany rearms and prepares for war. On a hot summer day, thirteen-year-old Briony observes a brief emotionally charged and suggestive encounter between her older sister, Cecelia, and Robbie, the son of one of the family's servants. She does not understand what she has seen. Shortly thereafter she reads a note Robbie has written to Cecelia, a note he wrote in youthful whimsy to amuse himself, never intending Cecelia to read it. The result of all this is that thirteen-year-old Briony comes to a terribly wrong conclusion about what is going on

between her sister and Robbie. And when the occasion presents itself, she makes a false accusation that lands Robbie in jail.

Five years later Robbie has been released from jail to go to Europe with the British Expeditionary Force, now retreating toward Dunkirk. Cecelia is in London, a nurse, waiting for Robbie. Briony, now eighteen, has realized and acknowledged her terrible betrayal and the harm it has done. She too is a nurse in wartime London, trying to make amends, put things right, seeking atonement. And as the movie comes to a conclusion, it seems to me that the author, one of the finest by the way, is saying, at least, that atonement, forgiveness, restoration to wholeness, and reconciliation are very, very elusive and difficult and, in this life, maybe not possible.

We have our own atonement story and it, too, begins with an act of betrayal, equally complex. The provocateur is Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus.

The story line in the movie, in the Gospel and in our lives is that lives get broken, relationships get broken, people get hurt or even killed. There is betrayal, deceit, and pain inflicted on others. It happens every day. Look around! Much of the brokenness in is a result of sin in our disregard of God and of each other. It was Reinhold Niebuhr, the American theologian, who said that sin is not necessary but it is inevitable. It is a sobering thought, “not necessary but inevitable,” it is a part of our life together.

So we cry out with the prophet Ezekiel. “Can these bones rise again?” Is there any way we can find life after the tragedy of betrayal, pain and death? Is there hope to restore and to be reconciled when we seem at the end of our resources. The proclamation of the Gospel is God in Jesus Christ come among us to set things right. He pointed us towards a way out of the messes that we make with our lives. Scriptures say that God was in Christ reconciling the world.

Near his death on the cross, Jesus took a towel and he washed the feet of his disciples. Peter, impetuous Peter would have none of it. “No!” Peter says, “You will never wash my feet.” To which Jesus responds, “Peter, don’t miss the main point this is crucial. A new commandment I give you. The new commandment is the foundation for the possibility of atonement and the rebuilding of life. A new commandment I give you that you love one another.” As far as I can tell that commandment remains new, at least

untried by many of us. We are into vengeance and pay back. God is in the business of forgiveness, of making whole what was once broken.

Huston Smith, an authority on world religions, was asked about the single distinctive characteristic of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. For Judaism, Smith said it is the family, for Islam, it is prayers and for Christianity, it is forgiveness. Think about it, how many times in the Bible do we hear an invitation to forgive one another even as God has forgiven us. We repeat it every week in the Lords prayer, it appears in the Epistles and throughout Scripture.

Will Willimon writes:

It is as if, when God began creating the world, the first word was not "Let there be light," but rather, "Let there be forgiveness." There will be no world, no order out of chaos, no life from death, no new liaison between God and us without forgiveness first. Forgiveness is the first step, the bridge toward us that only God can build. The first word into our darkness is "Father, forgive."

Remember after he had been betrayed by Judas Iscariot, after he had been denied by Peter, after he had been deserted by his disciples, after they had fallen asleep in his hour of need, after he was hung cruelly on a cross. What did he say, "I'll get you, vengeance is mine says the Lord?" Not on your life, his prayer was, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Peter Gomes who was here on Tuesday night, in his book, Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living, has these words which I find helpful: This is the only reality: that God's love is the only thing that makes sense out of suffering, conflict, and tragedy. God's love does not do away with suffering, conflict, and tragedy: the cross should teach us that. God's love does not do away with it: God's love is the thing that makes it possible to bear it, to see it, to share in it, to understand it, and to pass through it. That is the truth of the Gospel; that is the essence of the Passion of our Lord.

God does not cause suffering like the struggle our brother, Michael Mburu, is engaged in with cancer or a tragedy like the murder of Eve Carson. We are mourning as a community as we stand with our brothers and sisters at UNC. We remember this morning the devastation of the grieving parents, the student body, the faculty and the administration at UNC. Such a bright,

charming and promising human being. No longer with us because of an appointment random act of violence.

We all ask that question, “Why?” Why random acts of violence? Why do such senseless acts take place, as they did at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University and not in Chapel Hill. I am deeply concerned about our culture, a culture consumed with violence, saturated with political violence. Entertainment is violent, video games are violent. We must pause and say to the grieving family, we care, say to the grieving neighbors, we care. We will not avert our eyes from this tragedy. We will ask questions about the violence in our society. We will pray and discuss. What ever we need to make this society a place where all God’s children are safe, will be our response.

We do this because at the very heart of the God we all love and worship, there is a love that will not turn away. God’s eyes will not be averted but God looks directly with us at the pain and suffering and will stand with us and encourage us to be agents of building a world where all of our children are safe.

Without redemption, without atonement and the reconciling love of God at work in our world and in our lives, we are confined to our brokenness. It is in the tears and prayers of love, the reaching out, the hugging and the supporting and the working to build a beloved community that we find our hope.

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

He demonstrated a new commandment that we love one another. Despite the tragedy, the pain and the suffering God’s love made known to us in the life and death of Jesus Christ, was let loose in this world. Scripture tells us that nothing, no disease, no violence, no betrayal, no apathy, not even death itself can separate us from the atoning love of God made known in Jesus Christ our Lord.

That is a story of atonement that we can believe, because it has the power to redeem us. Hear, believe and live the Good News of the Gospel. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven and there is hope. Amen.