

Mark 2:15-17

¹⁵ While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. ¹⁶ When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

¹⁷ On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

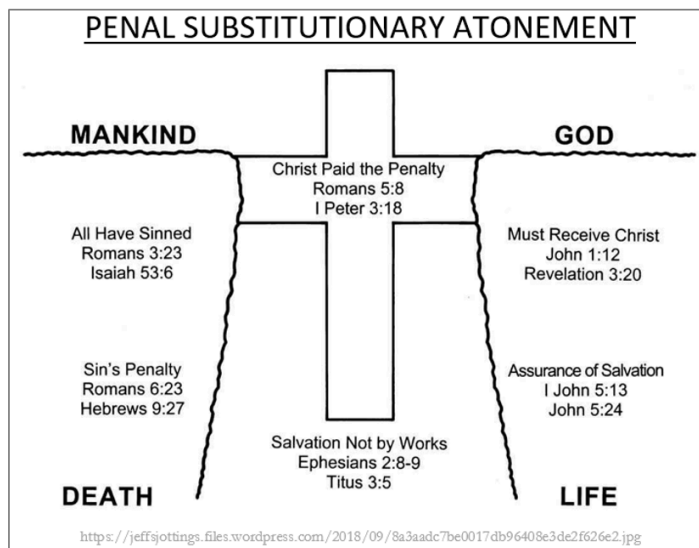
Call The Doctor: On the Medical/Healing Theory of Atonement (Mk 2:17)

The good news I have to proclaim this morning is that God has brilliantly repurposed our human mortality - through both Jesus' death and our own future deaths - to heal the disease of sin in us. And He exhorts us to cooperate with this healing through following & trusting in Christ. Last week was Trinity Sunday, and so we considered the doctrine of the Trinity, at least in reciting the Athanasian Creed. Well, today I want to turn our attention to another doctrine, which just means teaching, of the Church. And that is the Doctrine of the Atonement. The concept of Atonement essentially explains why Jesus had to die & rise and what it accomplished for humanity. But unlike the doctrine of the Trinity, which has been settled in the Church for at least 1500 years, when it comes to Jesus' Atonement there is *not* universal agreement at all on how exactly it worked. Rather,

there have actually been *many* different theories¹ derived from various readings of the Bible. However, as I preached about a few years ago, in American Christianity there is one theory of Atonement - one explanation of what Christ did at the cross - that is dominant. The fancy word for that theory is Penal Substitution (PSA). And I've included a diagram that represents how this theory works. But basically the Penal Substitution theory begins with the reality that all humans are sinful, but then it appropriates certain scriptures to argue that because God is holy and hates sin, but God's wrath is directed toward us, demanding that He punish us for our sin. So

according to this theory, our sin has created this separation between us and God - as the diagram depicts this chasm - but Penal Substitution contends that Jesus' death on the cross *bridged this gap*.

So, in the diagram Jesus's cross is depicted as a bridge over this huge chasm of separation between us and God, which remedied this separation by Jesus at the cross taking on himself the penalty due to us. Penal Substitution says that God can't help but have wrath toward us because of our sin, but that Jesus took the Father's wrath on himself at the cross so that for those who receive Christ's atonement through faith: through conversion and baptism we can now be in relationship with God.



¹ For example, two Theories of Atonement that will *not* be covered in this sermon include

- The Ransom / Christus Victor / Fishhook Theory - God offered his son as a ransom, a bargain that the evil one eagerly accepted. When, however, Satan got Christ down into hell he found that he could not hold him. On the third day Christ rose triumphant and left Satan without either his original prisoners or the ransom he had accepted in their stead.
- The Moral Influence Theory - When we look at the cross we see the greatness of God's love. This delivers us from fear and compels us to respond with love and no longer live in selfishness and sin. (Note: this theory is insufficient on its own)

So, if you go to any Evangelical Church in America, this is likely the theory you're going to hear every single Sunday. Though you'll never hear it referred to as a theory: it will more likely be presented as the summation of the whole gospel: as if the whole gospel (and Bible) is about God dealing with the problem of human sin by punishing Jesus with separation² & death. But in a few sermons two years ago,³ I explained why this Penal Substitution Theory is actually problematic for theological,⁴ emotional,⁵ historical⁶ reasons.

- Theologically, it teaches that God's wrath is directed toward humans rather than toward our sin; it contends God killed Jesus rather than humanity, and thus divides the Trinity by pitting God the Father against Jesus.
- Emotionally, or spiritually really, Penal Substitution can inhibit some - particularly victims of trauma - from hearing the gospel as good news at all, while it can stunt our spiritual growth of Christians because of it can give an impression.
- And then, in our own country's history, with its roots in Puritanism, which emphasizes Penal Substitution, this theory arguably bolstered the rationalization for slavery and our continued approach toward mass incarceration being penal rather than rehabilitative.

And you can read & hear more about all of this in my 2022 sermons.⁷

But here at St Matthias we don't police whether people subscribe to this Penal Substitution understanding of the cross or not. I understand that it is probably how most of us as Americans have learned the gospel; it's certainly the way the gospel was presented to me. But because it *is* so dominant and most of us have been given the impression that this is the only way the gospel, I do feel a pastoral obligation to share that there are alternative ways to understand what God did through Jesus at the cross. In fact, since the Penal Substitution theory is only 500 years old,⁸ we have the first 1500 years of

² One of the primary verses cited in support of God the Father punishing Jesus is when Jesus cries out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" on the cross, from Psalm 22. But as Nagasawa points out: in that Psalm David, "was lamenting being 'forsaken' to the Gentiles, "Just as Jesus was in his Passion, but David "did not believe God had abandoned him in an absolute sense." And so, to conclude Jesus felt that God the Father abandoned him completely does not come from sound biblical interpretation.

³ <https://www.saintmatthiasoakdale.com/penalsub>

⁴ Theologically, it pits God the Father against Jesus; God's wrath is toward us rather than just toward our sin; contends God killed Jesus rather than humanity.

⁵ Emotionally, PSA can inhibit many who have experienced significant trauma in life to either fight, flee, or freeze in response to this presentation of the gospel and not hear good news at all.

Moreover, PSA can have a stunting effect on Christian spiritual growth and maturity. And this is because it depicts God as ultimately having a narcissistic character. If the whole path to spiritual growth is for us to draw nearer to God, to be more vulnerable with him about all of our fears and failures, we're not going to want to do any of that with a God who we feel (consciously or subconsciously) is a narcissist. Instead, our inclination is going to be to keep our heads down and keep our distance, afraid of doing anything that might incur more of His wrath.

⁶ Historically, this theory is only 500 years old. Also, knowing that American history has been soaked in Penal Substitution, from its beginnings, this begins to make some sense of many penal elements in American culture and history. We all know the Southern roots of racism and slavery were justified by a distorted Christianity that viewed black people as sub-human and therefore deserving of enslavement (viewing black people as outsider others), as the most incarcerated country in the world, America's penal system and death penalty - which gets the most support from evangelical Christians - is based upon principles of penalizing or getting rid of the other who has shown themselves so undeserving, rather than rehabilitating them. Since 9/11, the 'undeserving other' phenomenon has manifested in attitudes toward Muslims after 9/11, and I could go on. If Penal Substitution says that God was angry at us and counted us worthless when we were apart from Christ and in our sin, then it makes sense that Penal Substitution trains Christians to view non-Christians as bad outsiders, worthy of love not wrath.

⁷ <https://www.saintmatthiasoakdale.com/penalsub>

⁸ While most believe the origins of PSA can be traced to St Anselm in the 11th Century, Anselm was only concerned with the idea of satisfying God's justice. It was really John Calvin, in the 16th century, who (with some inspiration from Martin Luther) codified the penal substitution theory as we know it. "The earlier ransom and *Christus Victor* (which can technically be split into two) theories of the atonement emphasize that god overcame the powers of Satan and evil to liberate humanity. Concerned that ransom theories attributed too much power to Satan, Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) developed a

Church history to draw on, where they were making sense of the cross in other ways.⁹ So what I want to spend the rest of my time sharing about is one of the more compelling atonement theories to me, and that is the Medical/Healing Theory of Atonement put forth by Mako Nagasawa,¹⁰ which he has derived from basically summarizing and synthesizing the perspective of many of the early Church Fathers from the 2nd to 4th centuries.¹¹ So today I want to share about this Medical/Healing Theory of Atonement not because everyone has to embrace it, but I do want to show that there are alternatives to the Penal Substitution many of us have been indoctrinated in that don't depict God the Father in such a problematic light. And, we'll see that the good news according to this Medical/Healing Theory is that God has brilliantly repurposed our human mortality - the fact that every human dies - as a means to heal the disease of sin in us, both through Jesus' death and our own. And He exhorts us to follow & trust in Christ as the way we cooperate with (the way we receive) this healing.

Now, what prompted me to get into this today is this scripture we read from Mark's Gospel, where Jesus frames himself as a healer of spiritual sickness, saying, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (2:17).¹² However, this motif of God as our spiritual healer or doctor is not novel to just Jesus, as you can see the insert includes three Old Testament passages (Exo 15:26, Jer 3:22, Jer 17:14) where God is framed as healing people from their sin. Also, just for fun, I threw in that Sirach reading about actual medical doctors¹³ from the Apocrypha, which though it is not Holy Scripture for us, does have devotional value! ("Make friends with a physician before you need one!" - there's some wisdom in that!) But, suffice it to say, the notion of God as healer of our sin has scriptural basis - it is not some modern innovation - and we'll see some further evidence of this from scripture as we go along. But let's get into it (how to understand what God has done for us in Christ through the Medical/Healing lens)...

And we need to begin with the story of Adam & Eve in Genesis 2 - though please understand, whether you interpret scripture as teaching that Adam & Eve were the first humans or were specially

theory of atonement that directed the drama of redemption around an offense to God, depicted as a feudal lord, and human beings, depicted as servants. The conundrum of atonement, as Anselm presented it, was how the offense against God could be satisfied (i.e. restored). Anselm argued that God could not forgive sinners simply out of mercy, so Jesus' innocent death as atonement was necessary to satisfy God's justice. This restores the honor to God that was defiled by human sin." [Hydinger, Sandage, Jankowski, and Rambo, "Penal Substitutionary Atonement and Concern for Suffering: An Empirical Study", *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, March 2017, Vol 45, No 1, 34.]

⁹ And to this day the Eastern Orthodox half of the Church gives no merit to PSA being a compelling and biblically sound theory of atonement.

¹⁰ Nagasawa, of The Anástasis Center for Christian Education & Ministry. Nagasawa actually calls it the "Medical Substitutionary Atonement" theory (MSA), but that seemed a bit technical for this sermon.

<https://newhumanityinstitute.wordpress.com/2021/02/10/atonement-theories-anger-part-5-why-penal-substitution-stunts-peoples-emotional-development/>]

¹¹ Nagasawa: "'Medical Substitutionary Atonement' is the nickname I give to the teaching about Jesus found throughout the early church, especially in the early Christian worship material called The Odes of Solomon (possibly late 1st century), the writings of Irenaeus of Lyons (2nd century), Athanasius of Alexandria (4th century), the three Cappadocian Fathers (4th century), and the poetry of Ephrem the Syrian (4th century)."

¹² Healy: "The sick referred to here are the tax collectors and sinners. Thus the most debilitating ailment that he came to heal is sin. Jesus is assuming the role of God himself."

¹³ Sirach 38:1-15 (Common English Bible) -

¹ Honor doctors for their services,* since indeed the Lord created them. ² Healing comes from the Most High, and the king will reward them. ³ The skill of doctors will make them eminent, and they will be admired in the presence of the great. ⁴ The Lord created medicines out of the earth, and a sensible person won't ignore them. ⁵ Wasn't water made sweet by means of wood so that the Lord's strength might be known? ⁶ And he endowed human beings with skill so that he would be glorified through his marvelous deeds. ⁷ With those medicines, the doctor cures and takes away pain. ⁸ Those who prepare ointments will make a compound out of them, and their work will never be finished, and well-being spreads over the whole world from them.

⁹ My child, when you are sick, don't look around elsewhere, but pray to the Lord, and he will heal you. ¹⁰ Stay far from error, direct your hands rightly, and cleanse your heart from all sin. ¹¹ Offer a sweet-smelling sacrifice and a memorial of fine flour, and pour an offering of oil, using what you can afford. ¹² And give doctors a place, because the Lord created them also, and don't let them leave you, because you indeed need them. ¹³ There's a time when success is in their hands as well. ¹⁴ They will also ask the Lord so that he might grant them rest and healing in order to preserve life. ¹⁵ May those who sin against their creator fall into the hands of a doctor.

*Hebrew: Make friends with a physician before you need one.

brought into Eden by God, as created from nothing or chosen from the species who had evolved into humans - it doesn't matter: everything I share today works from either perspective.¹⁴ So, beginning with the story of Adam & Eve in Genesis 2,¹⁵ there we see that God intended for humans to grow in relationship with Him¹⁶ and to reign over creation as His representatives, in ways consistent with His goodness/character. And Adam & Eve's access to the Tree of Life¹⁷ meant they would be able to do this forever, immune from death. However, when Adam & Eve turned away from God to sin, this brought about a corruption of their human nature that the rest of us inherit, or you might say the *spiritual disease of sin that spread to all of humanity* (and all subsequent generations).¹⁸ This disease of sin causes us to be ruled by disordered desires¹⁹ to seek significance, security, and belonging apart from God.²⁰ As Genesis would report a few chapters later:²¹ the human heart - a biblical metaphor for our desires & will - sin would harden humans' hearts *against* God to varying degrees.²² So, in order for this sinful state to not become humanity's *permanent state*, the Lord *mercifully* barred Adam & Eve from the Garden - from access to the Tree of Life - which meant that they and all of humanity thereafter would be subject to mortality,²³ to death, to dying.²⁴ But when God punishes, it is always for our good, and the good news is that God's plan was to brilliantly repurpose our human mortality - through both Jesus' death and our *own future deaths* - to heal the disease of sin in us.

And yet, in order to get to Jesus, the Lord called the people of Israel (in Genesis 12ff) - as a focus group of sorts - and God gave Israel something akin to "a very demanding (spiritual) health regimen" to

¹⁴ For teaching on this, see <https://www.saintmatthiasoakdale.com/gae>

¹⁵ Whether they were the first humans or they were chosen from many evolved humans or specially created but not the only humans really has no bearing on this, fwiw.

¹⁶ Nagasawa: "(Irenaeus in the 2nd c A.D. said) God created us "to ascend" infinitely, in a relational and spiritual sense: 'making progress day by day, and ascending towards the perfect, that is, approximating to the uncreated One.' That is logically required by the fact that God made us to be finite beings, and called us to participate in the infinite love of His Triune relations. Given that God is the Triune Father, Son, and Spirit, there was no other way God could have created us. The early Christians concluded that God created us to grow in goodness and relationship and virtue, which would have supplied Adam and Eve with the experiences they needed to trust and love God more and more."

¹⁷ Genesis 2:9b - "In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."

¹⁸ I prefer the perspective of Jon Garvey that Adam & Eve's sin could not be reversed because they had now receive personal and intimate knowledge/revelation of God. Sin is a rejection of that and is largely transmitted socially (as opposed to genetically). But, again, other perspectives are compatible with what is being laid out here.

¹⁹ Nagasawa: "In the third and fourth centuries, the Christian vocabulary for humanity came to formally mirror the Trinitarian discourse about divine persons and divine nature. We are human persons with human natures. God invites us as persons into a joint partnership with Him to mature our human nature. ...Disordered loves, however, were possible, resulting in evil. Evil was possible not because God made evil things, or created evil in us, or required evil to teach us good by pedagogical contrast, but because we can receive good things in a disordered way that God did not intend, like prioritizing one's spouse beneath one's parents (contra Genesis 2:24 - 25)."

²⁰ Or, Nagasawa describes sin as "self-centered human nature, where we try to define good and evil from within ourselves, as opposed to leave the definition with God alone."

²¹ Gen 6:5 - "The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time."

²² Nagasawa: "The problem was evident in the biblical story through a tightly compressed story of Adam and Eve's descendants. Cain did not need an external voice of temptation like the serpent because, for him, the voice of jealousy was internal to him (Genesis 4:1 - 8). And Cain made the problem in himself worse (Genesis 4:9 - 16)"

²³ Nagasawa: "Our mortality (and natural death) became one of God's surgical tools, not a retribution by a God who wanted to 'get even.'"

²⁴ As to whether there were humans prior to this (via evolution) who were mortal, as I would suggest, or not, this line of thinking still works either way.

heal their spiritual hearts by giving them His law, the Ten Commandments. In the Old Testament, God repeatedly speaks of circumcising their hearts, which he represented in commanding Israel circumcise their males - literally performing a physical medical procedure - to represent²⁵ the spiritual heart cure²⁶ God sought to perform on them.²⁷

Indeed, Nagasawa observes that circumcision continued the biblical motif of God using motifs of fire and swords or knives to represent a refining and surgical work, which began with the flaming swords guarding Adam & Eve from re-entering Eden and would continue into the New Testament with the sin & dross of our lives being burned away by the fire God's consuming love.²⁸ The flaming sword represented God's desire to burn away and/or cut away the corruption of sin from us, before we returned to the garden. It also set a literary pattern where God used the motifs of fire and swords/knives to represent a refining and surgical work that He wanted to accomplish within His people, with our cooperation as His patients.

And Nagasawa explains that if Israel would've been cooperative patients, the regimen of God's law "would have had a profound effect on the human nature of the Israelites, *if* they had been able to successfully follow the Doctor's orders." What cooperating would've looked like was Israel sharing in God's wrath - his anger - against their sin. [[And a key distinction of this Medical/Healing Theory of Atonement is that God's anger - His wrath - is aim against sin and the harm & death caused by it, where with a theory like Penal Substitution, God's anger is directed at *us* (for sinning), which is why it claims Jesus to the hit as our substitute on the cross.²⁹ But more on the cross in a sec.]]

So, "as patients, Israel sometimes cooperated with the divine Doctor, followed God's rigorous health regimen, and experienced some healing. But they also did not cooperate fully;" rather than *sharing* in God's anger against their sin instead fell in love with their sin more often than not. And so, God allowed Israel to experience exile from the Promised Land, similar to the way He had exiled Adam and Eve from Eden. But God also began to promise through His prophets He would make a way to replace humanity's hardened hearts with soft ones - or, as Ezekiel 36 says, replace our hearts of stone with hearts of flesh.³⁰

And Nagasawa explains that, when the time was right, God did this by sending "His son to be the *ideal patient* to fulfill Israel's hope. Jesus was born among the Israelites to take on human nature, and take up Israel's vocation of partnering with God to fight (our) sin-sickness." So, "Jesus acquired the corruption of sin in his own human body, fought the self-centeredness faithfully according to the Doctor's orders, and cleansed His human nature (in Himself, through perfect obedience,) as a true Israelite"

²⁵ See Deuteronomy 10:16, Jeremiah 4:4, Jer 9:25-26, Jer 17:1-10

²⁶ Writing His law on their hearts (Proverbs 3:3; 7:3).

²⁷ Nagasawa: "God commanded the Israelites to physically circumcise male infants and male converts which cut away uncleanness (Leviticus 12)"

²⁸ 1 Cor 3:10-15 - ¹⁰ By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. ¹¹ For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³ their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. ¹⁴ If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.

²⁹ Nagasawa: "According to PSA, God makes us the objects of His anger."

Personal note: This is one reason I struggle with the line of the Anglican Standard text of the confession that reads "provoking most justly your righteous anger against us" (which in my opinion is even worse than the 1662 BCP language of "wrathful indignation"), because it leans in the penal substitution direction (likely due to the strong influence of Reformed and PSA theology in Anglicanism).

³⁰ Ezekiel 36:26-27 - ²⁶ I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."

(Romans 8:3; Galatians 4:4).³¹ Through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, Jesus "substituted" himself in for Israel,³² in something akin to a "medical" treatment where He was perfectly faithful to the hard regimen of love by the Spirit. And, by being perfectly faithful all the way to death, Jesus put human sin to death in himself.³³ Then, by Jesus' resurrection, raised in Him was human nature that was "circumcised of heart", and His grace became a healing antidote for humanity who are still sick in our sin.³⁴ The good news is that God has brilliantly repurposed our human mortality - through both Jesus' death and our own future deaths - to heal the disease of sin in us. And He exhorts us to follow & trust in Christ as the way we cooperate with (the way we receive) this healing.

So, let me briefly explain *how* God has repurposed Christ's death and eventually our own future deaths to heal us from sin-sickness.

- 1) First, Jesus' death and resurrection provides us with a way to begin receiving God's healing from our sin-sickness in this life. This happens as we learn to live like Jesus through the power of His Holy Spirit.³⁵ As we daily taking the antidote of grace for our sin-sickness, God transforms our hearts to become more like His and to love sin less and less.
- 2) But then second, rather than our *own future deaths* being disastrous, for those who are in Christ, Jesus has transformed our natural deaths into the ultimate victory over sin,³⁶ promising that we will

³¹ Nagasawa: "Jesus' humanity carries a normative weight for our human experience. Not his occupation as a carpenter, or his gender as male, or his geographical location, but Jesus' vocation as a human being who is partnering with God's Spirit to fix and fulfill human nature by bearing God's image and likeness to the full - that does mean something for us all. Jesus shows us what it means to be truly human - human as God intended it."
 ... "Jesus took the corruption of sin within himself to death, and sent it away from us. His death revealed and exemplified the central inner dynamic of his entire life: to resist every temptation and live his life faithfully unto God the Father."

³² So, in this sense, the Medical/Healing Theory of Atonement is substitutionary, but is substituted for Israel in particular, not for us (as the recipient of God's wrath, as PSA says).

³³ Romans 8:3-4 - "For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering [or *flesh, for sin*]. And so he condemned sin in the flesh,⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

Romans 6:6 - "For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with [rendered powerless,] that we should no longer be slaves to sin..."

³⁴ Nagasawa: "It is essential to say that Jesus' death and resurrection are two sides of the same coin. At his resurrection, Jesus showed the result and the goal of his obedience: to bring forth a freed and fulfilled humanity. At the cross, Jesus showed how absolutely committed he was to conquering the venomous corruption in his human nature, killing the thing that was killing us (John 3:14 - 15). He did not become the passive victim of the Father's judgment, because the Father judges no one (John 5:22), not even the Son, because the Father has given the Son the role of judge, including judging the sin-sickness out of human nature. And the Son did not suffer the abandonment of the Father at the cross, as a kind of punitive discipline which would have been intended for us, because although the disciples left Jesus, as Jesus said, "I am not alone, because the Father is with me" (John 16:32)."
 ... "When Jesus died, God was not pleased by his death per se. Death was a means to another, deeper, end. Through death, God separated out from Jesus' humanity the most sinister 'toxin,' the corruption which must be 'circumcised' from the human heart (Dt.10:16; 30:6), 'the flesh' (Jn.1:14; Rom.7:14 - 25), 'the likeness of sinful flesh' (Rom.8:3), 'the old self' (Rom.6:6), the 'venom' of the serpent (Lk.10:19). Thus in his resurrection, Jesus emerged without it."

... "Jesus' death was his final victory over the corruption of sin in his human nature, but his death was a continuation of the victories he won every single moment."

³⁵ Colossians 3:5-7 - "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. ⁶ Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. * ⁷ You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived." *Some early manuscripts *coming on those who are disobedient*

³⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:54-55a - "When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' ⁵⁵ 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?'"

be resurrected like He was,³⁷ fully healed from sin and with access restored to the Tree of Life, as Revelation prophecies.³⁸

And this is how God in His brilliance has repurposed our mortality - the horror of our human deaths - and worked it for our good: to heal the disease of sin in us. And He exhorts us to cooperate with this healing through following & trusting in Christ. So, we need not think of God the Father as angry at us or as having aimed that wrath at His beloved son. We can decline, if we desire, all of the theological and emotional and spiritual potholes the Penal Substitution saddles us with, and instead embrace Jesus as our antidote for sin & death. ##

And so, let me close with just a few words about *how* we cooperate with God's plan to heal us in Christ. As Jesus said in our verse from Mark today, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." He's speaking to Pharisees who believed the good they did and the laws of God that they kept made them righteous, that it was enough. But *everyone of us* has fallen short of that perfect standard of righteousness that only Jesus fulfilled.³⁹ As we read from First John today, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 Jn 1:8). Every one of us needs the antidote of Jesus' grace for this life and beyond, which is why Jesus said, "I have not come to call (those who think they are) righteous, but sinners," those who admit that our lives are *riddled* with sin. And so, receiving the antidote of Christ's grace requires we humble ourselves not just in conversion & baptism, but by actually following Him: by opening our lives *daily* to His grace. And unlike with Penal Substitution - which could make us *less than keen* to open our lives to God and to instead try to just take our forgiveness - trying to get our ticket punched for heaven - but then mostly keeping our heads down and staying out of God's way - this Medical/Healing understanding should make it irresistible - a no-brainer - to begin opening our lives to God and seeking to follow Him closely in our daily living.

³⁷ Nagasawa: "Jesus did not die instead of us; he died ahead of us"

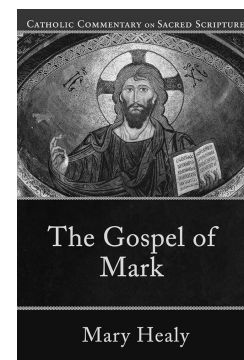
³⁸ Revelation 22:1-3a - "1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. 3 No longer will there be any curse."

³⁹ Healy: "Is (Jesus) excluding the scribes and Pharisees from his call? The answer is clear in light of the biblical testimony concerning who "the righteous" are. In the fullest sense of righteousness, "None is righteous, no, not one" (Rom 3:10 RSV; see Ps 14:1-3). All are sinners. The only difference is that some admit their lack of righteousness and some do not (see 1 John 1:8-10), thus refusing Jesus' messianic invitation (see Matt 22:3) and his medicinal grace."

And it is only when we become partakers of His grace in this life who can be assured that our future deaths will be victories,⁴⁰ leading to our resurrection, our complete freedom from sin, and forever access to the Tree of Life.

And so, today we'll have the opportunity to do all of this - to open our hardened hearts to God's healing once again - by humbling ourselves in confession of our sins and receiving the antidote of God's grace in Christ through His Holy Sacrament.

In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.



⁴⁰ Nagasawa offers a compelling defense of the doctrine of Hell:

"Many people feel pulled emotionally towards a Christian universalism, perhaps with a retributive version of hell that is not infinite, but finite. This is due to the fact that both the Arminian and the Calvinist conceptions of hell posit endless divine anger against human personhood. Whereas most human experiences with anger come to an end, why would God's anger be endless? It is difficult to imagine, relate to, and explain. Whether or not Scripture envisions a finite hell is an important question by itself; I think it is not finite, and I understand that that demands an explanation that continues to deepen our spirituality of anger.

"While attractive on one level, this "hell of finite retribution" proposal runs the risk of making light of human evil in the present, human choices in the present, and the journey of human nature, motivations, and desires. If God has a hell of finite retribution in the afterlife, then Christian faith would resemble a Hindu karmic system, and human motivations can collapse into the principle of self-centeredness, especially self-centered pain-management. Why should anyone strive that hard to follow Jesus and his teachings, when it can often lead to discomfort and death? If there can be a trade-off of some pleasure now for some pain later, why would that not be worth it? If so, then it would appear that no one's self-centeredness would be fundamentally changed, or even need to be. For God would be like a human debt-collector collecting on a finite debt, extracting suffering in exchange for all the obedience He did not receive from us before. And in eternity future, anyone who falls into sin again can be punished again. Which reintroduces the typical Hindu karmic cycles of fall and return, fall and return, etc. endlessly. And that highlights a vexing problem.

"Many advocates of this "finite hell" proposal would say that, in the end, on the other side of the torment, "love wins." [64] I am not so sure. It seems more accurate to say that, if finite retribution were true, then what really wins is self-centeredness and self-love. Everyone could and would be acting according to their self-centeredness. And if so, then human anger could never truly be more than the outburst of a petulant child not getting her or his way. Even God's divine retributive anger would have to be placed in the same category. God's anger would be the sound and fury of a divine parent who may have had to wait a little while, but who eventually got to vent because God has more power to be heard and felt than the rest of us. God's anger will have to be endured by children who just want to get their consequence over with after having eaten lots of sugary junk food. This is the problem of the petulant child. This problem demonstrates that in the scenario of the "finite hell," what would win is not love, but self-centeredness and self-love.

But what if God in eternity is not punishing people for stealing cookies, but rather setting a banquet where each new course is more nutritious and exquisite than the last, but some people refuse to acquire the appetite to enjoy it? What if God is preparing our eyes to see by the bright light of His presence, but some people refuse to train their eyes and instead pamper them in the dark? What if God is preparing us to develop musical instruments and vocalizations that are challenging and difficult and rewarding and provide whole new possibilities for music, but some people refuse to practice and acquire an appreciation for the discipline? What if God is preparing us to swim in the river of life, but some people refuse to learn to swim and instead choose laziness? What if Jesus wants to lead the family of God on a grander vacation, replete with gardening and exertion and shared responsibility and adventure, but some people want to stay in the car and be miserable?