

LIFE MATTERS 3: A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF 1 JOHN
1 JOHN 1:8-2:6
JANUARY 22, 2016

I ran across an interesting Bay Area character recently, famous or infamous depending on what you read. Charles Crocker was one of the owners of the Central Pacific Railroad that built the rail line from the Bay Area through Nevada into Utah. This all happened in the middle of the 19th century and made Crocker quite rich. Crocker was a large man purportedly 6'3" and 300 pounds at a time when the average male height was about 5'5". He was larger than life and a bit of a bully. That's how he built his fortune and also how he built his house.

Crocker built a mansion on top of Nob Hill as the area came into popularity. It was huge. The lot was huge. The only problem was that a man named Nick Yung, who moved to Nob Hill before it became popular, had a more modest house that was adjacent to Crocker's and infringed on the perfect house and the perfect lot that Crocker wanted to have. He offered to buy Yung's house but Yung loved the views and his family enjoyed the home. Repeatedly, Yung rebuffed Crocker's offers, so when it came time to build, Crocker had to do some demolition with dynamite and told the workers to aim the debris towards Yung's house. That didn't work either.

Then came Crocker's brilliant idea, to build a wall/fence that would be on his own property surrounding Yung's house on three sides. This fence was 40 feet tall completely blocking their views and effectively covering them up. This became known as Crocker's spite fence. At first people gawked and admired the audacity and rudeness of this spite fence, then people began to take offense. A powerful bully was forcing this helpless man's hand by constructing a wall, limiting options and fencing him in. There were some protests but nothing came up. The spite fence finally came down a few years later when Yung relented of living in the dark sold his place to the powerful bully. He was sick of being in the dark, covered up so he gave in.

If some of you are honest in this room today, you or someone you know feel a little bit like Nick Yung and view God as a bit of a Charles Crocker. When it comes to sin, salvation and atonement, this wall sounds kind of familiar. As some of you have heard, the good news of the gospel sounds something like this, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life. The brief synopsis is you are born sinful and because of this there is a wall between you and God. If you put your faith in the atoning death of Jesus, die to yourself and follow him, you will be saved from hellfire. Effectively when you hear about God, a huge wall comes up and you are in darkness and the only option is to sell your place so God can have all of you.

This is one of the central reasons I think many people are turned off by God. If we are honest, it sounds like the big bully Charles Crocker. I've heard more than one atheist whose major beef is that we are created by God and born as sinners with the immediate threat of hellfire and damnation. We are offered an option, which really isn't an option, that if we confess our sinfulness then God will relent, and the way this is possible is the atonement. The atonement goes like this, God was angry with humanity's sin, so he required a sacrifice to appease his anger, but our sacrifices weren't enough so he sent his Son, who was also divine, to die as a stand-in sacrifice, and whoever puts their faith in that sacrifice will be saved.

I want you to know some people have a problem with this because it sounds a little Charles Crocker-esque. At SFC, we don't want to live in an echo chamber and part of that is having difficult discussions about God. That means listening to people's qualms, doubts and concerns and this is a big one. I found a little snippet that I think captures this concept well:

<https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/564x/87/29/9b/87299bb111eb411f87939cdb2d684b55.jpg>

Thousands of gallons of ink have been spilled on this topic, specifically the topic of atonement. The big guy moves in next door, because of sin the wall went up, and the only

way you can come out of the darkness is to sell out. For some people, that doesn't sound like a loving God.

What do you do with a conundrum like this? I'm guessing for some of you today this is the chicken bone you choke on at the table. For others who don't have any problems here, I guarantee you that you have family members or coworkers who stumble here. Forget the apologetics about the Bible, or whether the resurrection happened. The entire premise that God sent himself to sacrifice himself to save us from himself is too much for a lot of people. It sounds strange especially with a world he created. It sounds like blackmail or extortion. It sounds like a bully building a wall and forcing you out. What do you do with this whole discussion?

If you are new here or haven't been here in awhile, we are in the middle of our series, *Life Matters* in the book of 1 John. We do this every year to talk about the big question we all face. What are we doing with this life we have been given? Here at SFC, we think it's important to talk about life after death, but we think it's also important to talk about life before death. We think Jesus offers a life like no other. The Greek word for life is *zoe*. It is abundant spiritual life. There is another word, *bios*, that is about eating, moving and breathing, the logistics of life. *Zoe* is that intangible life of joy, love, peace and hope. It's feeling connected with God, knowing and being known and finding your purpose in this world. We think *zoe* life is found with an easy three-ingredient recipe, Life in God, Life with Others and Life for Others. This is our second week to talk about Life in God that brings us to this challenging passage today, and those big questions about the wall between us and God and how that problem gets solved.

1 John 1:8-10

The set up is simple. Everyone is a sinner. John makes this point clear. Don't forget our context for this passage. John is writing to a church that is mired in dualistic, proto-gnostic thinking. They believed flesh was evil and the mind was good. That led them to two major problems, 1) if the flesh was evil, then Jesus didn't really come in the flesh. 2) If the flesh

was evil, then don't fight it. Sin doesn't matter or sin doesn't even exist. John's message is simple, 1) Jesus came in the flesh, so the flesh matters. 2) If the flesh matters, then obeying the commandments matters. 3) The commandment to focus on is loving each other tangibly.

But they didn't think of themselves as sinful or that sin mattered. John starts with the basic message. We are sinners. Sin happens. They are not quibbling over which things are sins. They think none of it is sin. This sounds a bit like the Bay Area. There are good discussions here about ethics although those often go in some strange directions. It is rare for people to categorize things as sin. John makes it clear and Jesus made it clear, there is sin, there is brokenness in the world that hurts us and hurts others. Your flesh matters and the consequences of what you do will affect your flesh and your relationship to God. That brings us to the heart of the matter, let's keep reading.

1 John 2:1-2

John has a strange assignment here. He is trying to convince them that they are sinners and to avoid sin, and in the next breath, he is comforting them with the knowledge that they will sin but God will forgive them. The key for our passage today comes in verse 2. He is the propitiation for our sins. Some of your Bibles translate it as the "atoning sacrifice." This is where we are camping out today. This is where a lot of people get tangled up, confused or zone out. Let's dig a little deeper.

This word for propitiation is used only twice in the New Testament and they are both in 1 John. The reason it isn't often used is because it is a pagan term meaning a sacrifice to appease an angry God. Another English term you might have heard is propitious, to make favorable towards someone. This sacrifice appeases God's anger and makes him propitious towards us. The problem is that is a pagan idea, and that's not how John is using it here. To be clear, this word is used twice in the New Testament, and everywhere else it is used outside of the Bible is about appeasing angry pagan deities.

John is using this to remind the recipients of his letter that sin is serious and Jesus died because of sin. Quite literally he died when sinful power-hungry Pharisees illegally convicted him. He died when a greedy zealot, Judas, betrayed him. He died when bloodthirsty Romans crucified him. Jesus died because of sin.

Remember John's purpose for writing this letter, Jesus came in the flesh, so the flesh matters. If the flesh matters, then obey the commandments. By reminding them of Jesus' death because of sin, he is killing two birds with one stone. Jesus died, and it was a direct result of sin. He is reinforcing the flesh and blood nature of Jesus and undercutting the fallacy of their entire argument that the flesh doesn't matter. Jesus disagrees and so does anyone else who has suffered.

Gnosticism and dualism were almost exclusively utilized by the upper class. Very few people who were poor or slaves dabbled in this philosophy and pseudo-religion. The super rich in this day had the luxury of making their religion all about knowledge with no tangible intersection with effects on people's bodies. The poor and lowly don't need to be reminded that sin is real and it is destructive. It has consequences, it breaks down bodies, it breaks up families, it kills souls and robs joy.

John is reminding them that sin is real, it has a price. Don't forget the lack of Old Testament quotes and verbiage makes it almost a certainty that John is writing to gentile Christians. Don't think John doesn't have more complex theology. In the Old Testament, the word that is often associated with atonement and sacrifice, the word that is directly connected to propitiation, is the word sometimes described as "mercy seat." That is the top cover of the Ark of the Covenant, the Kopporeth. The word quite literally means a cover, so the thing that covered the ark. It was a lid for the ark and it was hammered from a single piece of gold and it included an angel on each end of it. The ark was representative of God and there was a lid or cover as a barrier between man and God. It wasn't an idol, but a snapshot of the unseen reality of these angels surrounding their God.

Moses was told how to construct it then told to approach the ark specifically to hear from God. As time passed, the ark was housed in the holy of holies, behind a massive veil. The high priest would go in once a year for a sacrificial atonement before the ark that was closed off by Kopporeth. It was hidden, behind a veil and behind a closed lid. It seemed like a wall, a spiritual fence to keep people out.

Now then, the same John who wrote this epistle also wrote the Gospel of John, and he has a great way with words and painting pictures for the reader to see.

John 20: 11-18

The short summary: Mary Magdalene, a lowly woman who used to be demon-possessed, comes to the empty tomb, is surprised by the risen Jesus and gives him a hug. Did you see what happens in the beginning? Two angels sitting where Jesus laid, specifically one on each end. Does that ring a bell? Jesus is the Kopporeth. The thing that was a barrier to the presence of God is now opened up. If that message wasn't clear enough, the gospels also tell us the veil was torn from top to bottom. The holy of holies is opened wide. The wall between man and God came crumbling down torn apart at the seams. Jesus opened up the lid. The high priest used to quiver in fear before entering the holy of holies once a year and now Mary steps in and hugs God himself.

It's easy to get caught considering a Charles Crocker God, a big bully in the sky. One who is separated from you by a wall of his own construction. Jesus comes with a clear message, the lid is off, the veil is torn and he embraces his child.

I do believe sin has real consequences, and I do believe some people will spend their eternity separated from God. I also believe we have gotten way too dogmatic and comfortable pronouncing who is in and who is out. Did you notice in 1 John 2:2 that Jesus is the cover/propitiation for our sins and not just for ours only but also the whole world. I don't think John is a Universalist, but I think he is building on the reminder that the fact that Jesus often gave grace is shocking in its scope, its breadth and who gets it. He tells

stories about workers in a vineyard all getting a reward even though some only got in at the last second. He tells stories about religious outsiders named Samaritans who were the stars of the story. He told stories about prodigal sons who were welcomed home. When it comes to Jesus, you can never be sure where grace is going to land and who is going to get it. It's always surprising how profligate he is with grace.

One thing you can be certain of when it comes to grace is Jesus' harshest words are for the religious who pass judgment and seemed to be arbiters of eternal destinations. Like the older brother who is jealous of the son who came home, like the Pharisees who are scandalized by Jesus' presence with sinners and tax collectors. As the source of grace, Jesus gets really upset by those who block its flow.

If Jesus tore the veil and took off the lid, the last thing we should be doing is building walls, theological fences and spiritual barriers. Every few years, you might hear a public figure invoke Robert Frost's quotation, "Good fences make good neighbors." They use it as a reminder that boundaries and security is the key to good international relationships, but they are misquoting Frost. The narrator is perplexed by the fence. His friend who is in the dark and ominous insists on a fence because his father did it before him and because "good fences make good neighbors." The whole point of the poem is that fences are alienating not endearing.

We shouldn't build them. We should avoid prognosticating about who is in and who is out. That's not our job, and we can never know the heart of man or the grace of God. I was talking to Pastor Tim this past week, who (like myself) is a proud graduate of Fuller Seminary. He told me back when he was in school after telling someone he was studying to be a pastor and where he was studying, this man told Tim he was backslidden at best and at worst probably going to hell. If that's true for Tim and me, I don't know what he would have said to Arvin's degree from Princeton.

A great quote from Augustine:

Do not despair one of the thieves was saved

Do not presume one of the thieves was damned

Referring to the two men on either side of the cross at his crucifixion, one man turns to him in repentance and according to some readings the other thief mocked him. Some have taken this to mean, don't lose hope because there is salvation for some, and do not be flippant because there is damnation for others. More recent readings have suggested it reads as, "do not presume/assume that one of the thieves was damned." Yet again this is a reminder that our hearts are quick to judge, to build fences and erect walls where none are needed.

The Charles Crocker mansion and his spite fence, along with many other houses, were lost in the great fire of 1906. Today in its place at the corner of California and Taylor streets sits Grace Cathedral. Where there was once a spite fence, today there is grace. May that be true for all of us this week.