Atoning Ordinary Harm: A Practical Theology of Non-Moral Harm and Its Remedy

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Abstract: One of the challenges of asking for and offering forgiveness is determining whether the harm committed or experienced counts as harm. Philosophers and psychologists have argued that unless harm is moral, it does not warrant forgiveness. Yet many of the everyday harms that both Christians and non-Christians experience, while non-moral, reverberate interpersonally in the framework of morality, which makes their satisfactory remediation a challenge for all involved. In this paper I propose an epistemological rather than phenomenological definition of harm that accepts non-moral harm as actually harming. The essay then investigates two medieval soteriological stories that theologize harm in ways that make room for both moral and non-moral harms, and suggests ways of remediating ordinary harm ("forgiving") that appropriately address the different character of moral and non-moral harms rather than assuming that all ordinary harms require repentance and confession for their remediation.

In this paper, I consider the ways in which most atonement theories both name and reinforce the notion that the human experience of "not right" is primarily a matter of sin or moral harm, and that the solution to the problem—forgiveness—must therefore be one of moral enactment. I am especially interested in the worldviews these atonement theories advance and the imaginations they cultivate. My thesis is that almost all atonement theories shape an imagination inadequate to engaging the possibility of a Christian remediation of non-moral harm and consequently are ill-equipped to address much of the ordinary harm most Christians experience. As a practical theologian and professor of congregational formation, I am interested in finding a theological basis for attending to both moral and non-moral harm on two fronts: (1) practically, as a way of attending to the breadth of the most common kinds of harm that people experience; and (2) formationally, as a way of shaping a *habitus* of atonement (literally, at-one-ment) that is distinctly Christian.[1]

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1. See Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* (Baker Academic, 2016), 39 ff. Kreider draws on the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to argue that what truly forms us is not only what we consciously believe but also (and perhaps more importantly) the

In what follows I first briefly describe what I consider to be "ordinary" harm, especially harm that we might describe as non-moral. I then consider definitions of the self and of harm that are epistemological rather than "objective" as a way of opening up the possibility that non-moral harm is, indeed, harming, as we intuit it to be when we experience it. Third, I suggest that the doctrine of the atonement is best understood as a theological metaphor and that this metaphor points toward reciprocal action that remediates harm. In other words, I argue that the doctrine of the atonement includes not only what God does with harm but also what we do with it. Fourth, I place two medieval soteriological accounts—that of Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) and that of Julian of Norwich (1342–1416)—side by side as a way of considering the contributions they can make to our thinking about remediating ordinary harms, both moral and non-moral. Finally, I propose that these two similar yet surprisingly different accounts underline both a strength and a weakness of Mennonite theology and practice, which opens the way to a course correction that can help in atoning for the breadth of ordinary harm.

In particular, I argue that a profound recognition of our own neediness can help counteract a view of discipleship as a "spirituality of striving."[2] When we see ordinary harm, both moral and non-moral, through the lens of Julian's theology, we recognize that we do not need to satisfy God. God is already satisfied. On such an account, I suggest, Mennonite practices of discipleship that grow out of an ecology of grace—one that recognizes its own deep poverty yet is not laid low by it and that seeks improvement rather than perfection—are both more livable and more winsome.

Ordinary harm

The most common form of harm humans experience and perpetrate is what I call "ordinary harm." The easiest way to define ordinary harm is by what it is not: extraordinary. Extraordinary harm is what we often think of as "real" harm: murder, war crimes, sexual assault, breaking and entering, hit and runs, and so on. Extraordinary harm has two distinctive qualities: (1) it is moral harm; and (2) we agree it is moral harm.

Like extraordinary harm, ordinary harm also includes moral harm, though its moral nature is not as extreme and recognizable as extraordinary harm. Instead of manslaughter and fraud, ordinary moral harm includes lying, cheating in sports or at games, cat-calling, and failing to keep your word. Yet, unlike extraordinary harm, ordinary harm can

complex system of beliefs, attitudes, actions, and dispositions that makes up the ways in which we habitually respond to the world.

2. Thanks to my colleague Malinda E. Berry for this term.

also be *non-moral*: e.g., saying or doing something that touches a nerve or turning around too quickly and causing someone to spill their hot tea. In such instances, the fact that what one said incidentally reminds another of a past conflict, or that one's eye contact (or lack of it) is in harmony with another's experience of systemic injustice, or that one's wayward elbow splashes hot tea onto another's leg causes pain does not necessarily mean that the action was wrong per se. But because it hurts, the harm resonates between two people whether or not it is a moral offense and even whether or not one was not strictly "responsible" for it. When two people are in relationship with each other in ways that matter, this hurt needs to be remediated for them to move forward.

Many books have been written about extraordinary harm, and consultants make their living trying to help people remedy it. My effort is not aimed at that conversation. I want to focus specifically on ordinary harm for two reasons. The first is that for most of us ordinary harm is more plentiful than extraordinary harm, so there are more opportunities for reflection on and practice around it. The second is that our best learning rarely happens under moments of high stress or difficulty. Extremity by its very nature is the worst possible time to think clearly and try something new. If we want to make progress recognizing, owning, and remediating harm, we need to start in ways that are both smaller and more manageable.

While we surely would all benefit from being more skilled in apologizing (or asking for an apology) and making amends, we at least have some theological and biblical categories for recognizing moral harm as harm and knowing what needs to happen to remediate it. Non-moral harm, by contrast, does not appear to have been as deeply theologized, and the work of remedying it has mostly been left to psychologists and writers of self-help literature. Yet since it is at least as prevalent as moral harm in our primary relationships with families, friends, colleagues, neighbors, and fellow congregants, I believe it too deserves our attention. Doing so requires attending to our understandings of the self and of harm.

Human Becoming as an Experience of Meaning-Making

In Western philosophical and religious thinking, the self has often been understood as complete, independent, and rational. Think, for example, of René Descartes's famous assertion "I think, therefore I am" or of the charming notion of the homunculus.[3] Yet developments in epistemology,

3. Ancient Greeks (and Medieval Christians) believed that the human male provided everything needed for reproduction (i.e., a tiny fully formed little human who lived in the semen). As a result, women were simply the "incubator" in which this already-complete little person grew larger until it was ready to be born.

the physical sciences, and the social sciences point toward human incompleteness, dependence, and more than just rationality as the basis for the self. In other words, humans *become* rather than *are.*

Drawing on the work of philosopher Charles Taylor, theologian James K. Voiss has proposed the notion of a *matrix of meanings* as a way of thinking about human becoming. Taylor uses the word matrix "to name corporately and in their interrelationships"[4] the various factors that interact to make what was previously unthinkable (e.g., disease spread through germs or the idea of democracy) an accepted reality. Unlike a rigid structure, such as a house, a matrix is both relatively stable and at the same time flexible. In this sense, it accounts more convincingly for the ways ideas, cultures, or individual people can and do change while still remaining recognizable. They are different from, but not unrelated to, what they were before.

Voiss goes beyond Taylor in proposing more than one kind of matrix. The first is what he calls a *shared* matrix of meanings. This kind of matrix is composed of common sense or communal "truths": the convention of driving on an agreed-on side of the road, the grammars and vocabularies of languages or fields of study, particularly Christian beliefs and practices, and so on. *Shared* doesn't mean identical, however; rather, it indicates a "sufficiently common fund of meanings" that we sufficiently affirm so as to adequately communicate with each other.[5] Thus, while in many countries, people drive on the right side of the road, in England and most of its former colonies, people drive on the left—which works as long as drivers remember which country that are in. Similarly, people who speak the same language may agree that words have meaning, and even agree about what a word means, while still nuancing a definition in a variety of ways. And Christians understand the meaning of Christian beliefs and practices in different ways, which keeps ecumenical dialogue alive and sometimes causes Christian groups to excommunicate each other.

The second kind of matrices are *personal* matrices of meanings—our individual sense of self that participates in our culture's shared matrix of meanings while simultaneously being "modified in light of [our] individual experience."[6] My personal matrix of meanings, for example, includes my social location (white, female, middle class, middle aged, educated, heterosexual, married, a US citizen, etc.) as well as the ways these "locational" factors are affected by particular aspects of my experience (growing up in France, living in a small town for most of my

4. James K. Voiss, *Rethinking Christian Forgiveness: Theological, Philosophical, and Psychological Explorations* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2015), 108.

5. Voiss, *Rethinking Christian Forgiveness,* n14, 110.

6. Ibid, 108.

adult life, spending my early adulthood as an at-home parent, etc.). I have much in common with other white, middle-class, middle-aged, educated, heterosexual, married, American women, but I'm also different from every other one of them in some ways, just as they are from me and from each other for reasons of personality, biology, experience, and other differentiating factors. Individual matrices of meanings manifest themselves in how we make sense of the world, what we value, and what we detest. All of these factors contribute both to our delight in and to our miscommunications with each other.

Closely associated with Voiss's concept of "matrices" is his understanding of "meaning." According to Voiss, meanings are not only ideas or theories; they also include the whole range of feelings, thoughts, values, experiences, and relationships of both our conscious and unconscious life, and the interactions between these various elements that we use "to construct an understanding of the world" and what we contend with in it.[7] Rather than a collection of meanings from which we pick and choose at our convenience, in a matrix of meanings, individual meanings "mutually condition one another within a larger context of interrelated meanings called a 'matrix.'"[8] In other words, meanings "in real life" do not exist all by themselves. Instead, they come in clusters that are connected to, and thus influence and "shade," each other. As a whole, they have a kind of power and felt coherence that may not make sense or seem equally significant to someone who does not share that matrix of meanings. Our personal matrices of meanings include our sense of self, our sense of the world, and our sense of our place in that world—and thus what we do and say and think as a result.

Here is a personal example: Once, on returning from a two-week trip to France to celebrate my twentieth anniversary, I accidentally kissed several people in the Midwestern congregation on whose pastoral team I served. My personal matrix of meanings for "appropriate greetings for people from church" included growing up in Paris (a cultural context), having a relatively high tolerance for touch and a relatively low need for personal space (a bodily predisposition), a history of good kisses of various kinds (experience), the conviction that relationships within the congregation are intimate and important ones (an idea), and 1 Corinthians 16:20 (a biblical text).[9] Each of these elements strengthened or supported the others so much so that kissing a church member as a means of greeting

7. Ibid.

8. James K. Voiss, "Thought Forms and Theological Constructs Toward Grounding the Appeal to Experience in Contemporary Theological Discourse," in *Encountering Transcendence: Contributions to a Theology of Christian Religious Experience*, ed. Lieven Boeve, Hans Geybels, and Stijn Ven Den Bossche, (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2005), 251.

9. "Greet one another with a holy kiss" (NRSV).

was simply *obvious.* In addition, my personal matrix of meanings around kissing and church intersected almost completely with the shared matrix of meanings of my childhood congregation in the outskirts of Paris—it was not only a personal matrix of meanings but a shared one. This shared matrix of meanings had been reactivated by my trip to France where I had spent two weeks immersed in this intersection of my personal matrix of meanings and the world in which it was formed and supported.

My beautifully integrated personal and shared matrices of meanings did not connect so well with the personal and shared matrices of my fellow churchgoers in northern Indiana, however. For some of the people in my congregation, kisses were for immediate family only; for others, experiences of sexual harassment or abuse made it difficult to tolerate being hijacked by someone else's actions; for others still, tactile hypersensitivity made light touch irritating; for most, the truth was that *adults just don't kiss in church*. So for some of the people in my congregation, my kissing them was just awkward. Yet as Voiss writes, new meanings (experiences, ideas, associations, feelings, interpretations, etc.) that challenge any of these aspects can disrupt one part or unsettle the "structural integrity" of our personal matrix of meanings.[10] Thus, for some in my congregation, my kissing them was a major blow to our relationship and their trust in me.

Harm as an Epistemological Event

My contention is that, in the story above, my kissing people in my congregation on returning from France was not moral harm. Different cultures greet each other differently, and though I look and sound Midwestern, that is not the totality of who I am. Nevertheless, my action harmed some of the people in my congregation and permanently altered my relationship with at least one of them. This is the case because, as Voiss argues, harm is whatever is "disruptive of the meanings by which our sense of self is constituted."[11] What makes something harmful is when we recognize it as such—it is a matter of *interpretation*. And when harm "*is* recognized as harm it is experienced as an assault on the self."[12] Because we are vulnerable, we receive life's bumps not as neutral but as attacks. This instinctive or immediate interpretation is not in and of itself an indicator of immaturity, lack of psychological health, or a toxic personality; it simply *is*. And because our interpretation of something as harm is our functional reality, it needs our attention, if for no other reason

10. Voiss, *Rethinking Christian Forgiveness,* 167.

11. Ibid., 174.

12. Ibid., emphases in the original.

than to pause and consider whether this interpretation sets the most helpful, accurate, or desirable trajectory for our ongoing becoming.

Here is another example—this time from the early years of my now over three-decade-long marriage. That I still remember this event and that my husband cannot, even when I describe it to him, is part of what makes it so interesting. When we were in our late 20s or early 30s, probably eight or nine years into our marriage, we were cleaning up after supper one evening, when my husband, Randy, threw away a small quantity of green beans. I was devastated. He was uncomprehending. I was furious. He was incredulous. I thought he had behaved badly. He could not figure out why. I could not believe he could not.

Was our relational upset caused by my being over-emotional, unreasonable, or fussy? Or by Randy being insensitive, wasteful, and controlling? I would suggest that the answer is *neither*. I experienced harm and our relationship was upset because Randy's actions shook my matrix of meanings. His throwing away the green beans communicated to me that he did not recognize or value what I contributed to our marriage, family, and economic life. To me, those green beans were not just green beans; they not only represented but were, in fact, the result of an enormous investment of my time and energy. I had tilled the garden, planted the bean seeds, weeded the garden, picked the beans, and cooked them (along with the rest of supper), all while managing the sometimes overwhelming task of running a household that included three active preschool boys. And the fruit of my labor was being consigned to the trash.

This scenario is typical of many non-moral harms and their consequences in interpersonal relationships. Randy interpreted what he was doing as throwing away a serving of vegetables so small it would rot in the back of the fridge. I interpreted his actions as negating my value as a contributor to our household and marriage. Both of us were making epistemological claims, and both the interpretations themselves and the gap between them contributed to a disruption in our relationship.

That there was more than one interpretation of what happened does not *a priori* mean that one was right and the other wrong or that both were equally valid. It means that both were present. The harm I experienced was *real*, the result of Randy's and my context and the ways it shaped both of us. He was an attorney who worked outside the home. In the social and financial economy of the world in which we lived, he was valuable: people came to him for advice for which they paid him handsomely, solicited his participation on boards, and networked assiduously with him in social situations. By the same standards, I was a great deal less valuable: my work was unpaid and took place within the confines of our home or

property; I was not approached by others for assistance with important projects; and at parties most people engaged me in conversation only to ask the ages of our children. So while it was easy in the moment for both of us to get fixated on green beans and what happens to them, the issue at stake was far more important—how we mattered and how we mattered *to each other*.

Finding "an 'objective' judge of the morality" or "a universally-agreed-upon standard of assessment" of what has happened is a problem even under the clearest of circumstances, as anyone who has ever been in a conflict knows.[13] Even in the case of extraordinary harm, who is to blame for the car accident or the war is not as straightforward, especially for those involved, as one might first think. Clarity is even more elusive in situations of ordinary harm. There is something about harm that makes it hard for us to find "shared facts." We do not see and understand events in the same way. And even if we can agree on what was said or done, these events do not share the same meaning to all those involved or to any bystanders.

ATONEMENT AS A THEOLOGICAL METAPHOR

Having established that harm is at least in part an experience of meaning, I want to turn to how harm is remediated. The doctrine of the atonement is the main way Christians have understood how God remedies moral harm (sin). I wish to argue that atonement also speaks to non-moral harm and that the work of God also invites human engagement.

As theologian Kevin Vanhoozer has observed, one of the legacies of modernism is the disconnect between knowing, being, and doing. In light of this disconnect, for doctrine to be both sound and life-giving, Vanhoozer argues that it needs "both the clarity of crisp concepts and the intricacy of lush metaphors."[14] Clear analysis (crisp concepts) and a holistic imagination (lush metaphors) must be combined with practice (specifically practicing the biblical text in new contexts) to "get doctrine into the lives of people."[15]

According to Vanhoozer, atonement theories, rather than being "a set of timeless propositions, an expression of religious experience, [or] grammatical rules for Christian speech and thought,"[16] are best

13. Ibid., 223.

14. Kevin Vanhoozer, *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition: Scenes of the Church's Worship, Witness, and Wisdom* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 13.

15. Ibid.

16. Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 30.

understood as theological metaphors. The function of metaphors is to shape imagination. The function of Christian metaphors is to shape Christian imaginations, imaginations that are in continuity with the gospel and capable of improvising on it. Christian metaphors help Christians imagine what could be and invites them to act accordingly.

The metaphorical quality of atonement theories is clearest in the illustrative stories preachers have been using since the Middle Ages, the hand-drawn sketches of salvation encountered at youth retreats,[17] and the lyrics Christians sing in religious gatherings and when they are taking a shower. The way theology gets into the church—the way it is taught (and learned) by most ordinary Christians—is "on the fly": we catch a bit here or there rather than doing a systematic analysis of a particular doctrine. This makes sense since song lyrics, stories, and pictures compress ideas into manageable bites and are memorable enough that we can easily carry them with us. This is what it takes for them to be available as resources for the ways people improvise living their lives *Christianly*. It also means that we do well to carefully consider available metaphors and what they both open up and shut down.

To call theology metaphorical helps us remember two important realities that sometimes get lost in grassroots theologizing: (1) that our theologies are approximations (as in the Zen saying: "fingers pointing to the moon") and (2) that our theologies are partial (as in the Hindu parable of the blind men and elephant). Theological reflection is humanity's best guess about what God is up to and how God is up to it.

Atonement as a Reciprocal Performance

Some atonement metaphors are primarily concerned with what God does to remediate what is not right—so-called *objective* theories of the atonement, such as substitutionary atonement. Others focus more on the effects of the atonement on humans—so-called *subjective* theories, such as Abelard's moral influence theory. Mennonite peace theologians have highlighted a vision of atonement that is rooted in the Hebrew Bible's notion of *shalom*, which captures God's holistic intention for comprehensive wholeness—it is salvation, justice, and peace woven together rather than as separate concepts.[18] While the theological significance of the New Testament counterpart to shalom, *eirene*, "comes to a peak" when it refers to the results of Jesus' death and resurrection,

17. See https://www.navigators.org/resource/the-bridge-to-life/ or http://geoffrey holsclaw.net/the-other-bridge-illustration-visual-christus-victor/.

18. Perry B. Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice, and Peace* (Newton, Kan.: Faith and Life Press, 1987) and Perry B. Yoder, *Banking on God: Exploring Salvation in the Bible* (Elgin, Ill.: Brethren Press, 2001).

peace is central to God's purpose not only in Jesus' death but also in his life, ministry, and resurrection—and in the life of those who follow in his footsteps.[19] In the witness of the New Testament, "human relationships are included in the theological domain,"[20] and the point of life is not only peace with God but also "positive peace" between humans, ranging from reconciliation between siblings who have offended each other, to reconciliation between Gentiles and Jews, to love of enemies.

In his book *A Community Called Atonement,* New Testament scholar Scot McKnight aptly names this bi-directional aspect of atonement as "reciprocal performance."[21] He cites two teachings of Jesus—the Lord's Prayer and the parable of the unmerciful servant—as foundational for understanding atonement as involving both what God does and what we do. In the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:12 and Luke 11:4), Jesus teaches his disciples to ask God to forgive our sins, or "owing," as we also forgive those "owing" us.[22] In case we miss the connection between divine forgiveness and human forgiveness, in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus continues: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."[23] Jesus reiterates this idea in story form in the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:21-35). The servant whose debts are originally cancelled finds them due after all because he has not shown to others the mercy shown to him. Again, the link between human actions and God's actions is clear: "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."[24]

McKnight sees forgiveness, atonement, and reconciliation as "synonymous expressions."[25] If we are to perform them reciprocally, we who have been forgiven, atoned, and reconciled in turn forgive others, do our part to help to make one, and accept the "ministry of reconciliation," which has been given us by God.[26] As "ambassadors for Christ," our job

19. Yoder, *Shalom*, 20.

20. Ibid., 21.

21. Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2007), 28.

22. In what people need to be forgiven for, Matthew uses the word ὀφειλήματα, literally "a due"; Luke uses the word ἁμαρτίας, literally "sin." Both Matthew and Luke use variants of ὀφείλω, literally "person indebted" or "delinquent," for those whom humans need to forgive.

23. Mt. 6:14-15. The word παραπτώματα, which the NRSV translates "trespasses," literally means "false steps."

24. Mt. 18:35, NRSV.

25. McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement,* 30.

26. 2 Cor. 5:18.

is to represent accurately and fully the one who sent us.[27] If God is about reconciliation (atonement), then that is what Christians are about too.

Contrasting Theological Metaphors for the Human Condition: Anselm and Julian

Having established that atonement metaphors implicate not only God but also humans, I want to look at two nearly identical illustrative stories that make quite different soteriological points and thus open up different possibilities for thinking about forgiveness. While the stories are not soteriologies *per se*, they are each embedded in rich theological reflection and offer intriguing images of what it is that needs to be made one and how that atonement happens.

The first story comes from the Benedictine monk and theologian Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109). The second comes from Julian of Norwich (1342–1416), an English anchorite who lived about 200 years after Anselm. I turn to Anselm because, apart from *Christus Victor* and its variants, nearly all contemporary atonement theories are either "developments of, or reactions against" his satisfaction metaphor for the atonement.[28] I turn to Julian because Julian's atonement metaphor turns Anselm's on its head in a way that opens up fascinating possibilities for thinking about atoning non-moral harm.

In order to show that humans are responsible for their predicament—in this case, for the fall—Anselm tells a brief story. A slave is given a job by the master. The job is not specified, but it does not need to be; the obligation of the slave is to fulfill it. The master points out a deep pit, too deep for the slave to get out of, and explicitly tells the slave to avoid it. The slave not only ignores the master's warning but willfully leaps into the pit. Anselm asks: Does the fact that the slave is stuck in a pit in any way excuse his not doing his job? The answer is clearly no; the predicament of the slave is entirely of his own making.[29]

The links between Anselm's story and the Genesis account of the fall are apparent: God tells the humans not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but they do—and in so doing, they are unable

27. 2 Cor. 5:20.

28. Ben Pugh, *Atonement Theories: A Way through the Maze* (Cambridge, U.K.: James Clarke Company, Limited: 2015), 45.

29. *Cur Deus Homo* 1.24, https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/anselm-curdeus.asp#ACHAPTER%20XXIV. "Suppose one should assign his slave a certain piece of work, and should command him not to throw himself into a ditch, which he points out to him and from which he could not extricate himself; and suppose that the slave, despising his master's command and warning, throws himself into the ditch before pointed out, so as to be utterly unable to accomplish the work assigned; think you that his inability will at all excuse him for not doing his appointed work?"

to fulfill their purpose of tending the garden and its inhabitants and communing with God in the cool of the evening. In spite of trying to blame each other and the serpent, it is clear who is at fault: They are. If they had obeyed, all would be well.

Anselm's story and the biblical account in Genesis both picture human reality in a way that is deeply familiar psychologically, legally, experientially, and theologically. Something goes wrong, and someone is clearly at fault. Your teacher tells you to do your homework; you do not bother; you get a failing grade. Your neighbor warns you to look both ways before crossing the street; you do not; you get hit by a car. Your mother tells you to leave your brother alone; you cannot resist taunting him; he slams your hand in the piano lid. In such instances, the assessment of fault seems fair enough: It is a good idea to do your homework, look both ways before you cross the street, and leave your brother alone.

Mystic and anchorite Julian is less well known than Anselm. Joan M. Nuth, however, argues that Julian's *Showings* "deserves a place alongside [Anselm's] *Cur Deus Homo* as an important medieval soteriological study."[30] In a version of her revelations known as the "Long Text" Julian tells a story that is similar to Anselm's but with a significant difference: She implies that the fall is an "unfortunate accident for which the servant is not responsible."[31] Julian's story comes out of a different project than Anselm's. While Anselm is seeking to provide a logical argument for why God had to become human to save us, Julian's story emerges from a series of visions she was given on what she thought was her deathbed.[32] The Long Text offers both her visions and her twenty years of reflections on them as she tried to make sense of her epiphany. The message of her revelations is that God looks on sinners with love, not wrath—a sharp contrast with the religious atmosphere of the fourteenth century and its "fascination with sin" and "often extreme fear about damnation."[33]

The outline of Julian's vision is almost identical to Anselm's story. There is a master and an underling—this time a servant rather than a slave. The master sends the servant off to do his job. The servant goes so eagerly and so quickly that he falls into a ravine and gets hurt. Unable to get himself out of the ravine, he is unable to complete his job.[34] Julian

30. Joan M. Nuth, "Two Medieval Soteriologies: Anselm of Canterbury and Julian of Norwich," *Theological Studies* 53 (Dec. 1992), 612.

31. Ibid, 616.

32. Nuth argues that it is possible that Julian knew Anselm's work in *Cur Deus Homo*, so it might be that her dream vision is a departure from his story. Whether or not this is the case, she draws a different conclusion from rather similar circumstances.

33. Nuth, "Two Medieval Soteriologies," 621.

34. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/52958/52958-h/52958-h.htm#THE_THIRTEENTH_REVELATION, 107-109. "I saw two persons in bodily likeness: that is to say, a Lord and a

considers whether she can find any fault in the servant or if his Lord will "assign to him any blame."[35] Not only does the Lord not censure his servant, but he takes pity on him, rewarding him "above what he should have been had he not fallen."[36]

While Anselm's perspective makes a kind of intuitive sense, the impact of Julian's alternative vision is not as immediately obvious. To elucidate its impact, then, let us revisit the brief stories mentioned above of homework, dangerous streets, and encounters with siblings—but this time from Julian's perspective. Your teacher assigns you homework, and you are so thrilled with the subject matter that you go down a research rabbit hole that yields all kinds of fascinating information—though not for the paper you were assigned. You run into the street to pick up your escaping kitten, and you narrowly miss being hit by a passing car. You and your brother are happily playing together, and you decide to punch him in the stomach out of genuine curiosity about what it is like to punch someone, something you have never done before; you do so, he returns the favor, and you experience both punching and being punched—an enlightening experience.

In Julian's way of seeing, the problem is not that you *were* bad or that you *did* a bad thing (although the brother-punching might be unwise). The problem is that you are paralyzed by worry that you are not a good enough student, or that your knees are buckling from your close call, or that you are stunned that what seemed like a good idea in theory turns out not to be one in practice. And God the teacher, street-crossing witness, and parent is there looking at you in love—witnessing with tenderness your realization that you did not do the assignment, comforting you after your narrow miss, and telling you to keep breathing after that gut-punching sibling exchange.

Servant; and therewith God gave me spiritual understanding. The Lord sitteth stately in rest and in peace; the Servant standeth by afore his Lord reverently, ready to do his Lord's will. The Lord looketh upon his Servant full lovingly and sweetly, and meekly he sendeth him to a certain place to do his will. The Servant not only he goeth, but suddenly he starteth, and runneth in great haste, for love to do his Lord's will. And anon he falleth into a slade, and taketh full great hurt. And then he groaneth and moaneth and waileth and struggleth, but he neither may rise nor help himself by no manner of way. . . . And in sooth there was none seen: for only his goodwill and his great desire was cause of his falling; and he was unlothful, and as good inwardly as when he stood afore his Lord, ready to do his will. And right thus continually his loving Lord full tenderly beholdeth him. But now with a *double* manner of Regard: one outward, full meekly and mildly, with great ruth and pity,—and this was of the first [sight], another *inward,* more spiritually,—and this was shewed with a leading of mine understanding into the Lord, [in the] which I saw Him highly rejoicing for the worshipful restoring that He will and shall bring His Servant to by His plenteous grace; and this was of that other shewing."

35. Ibid, 108.

36. Ibid, 109.

Though Anselm and Julian have much in common—both were formed in Benedictine monasticism, both draw from a similar theological frame, and both were rooted in a feudal social order—their soteriologies, of which these stories are representative, are quite different. Indeed, Nuth writes that Julian "*reverses* Anselm's purpose to establish human responsibility for the fall."[37] Anselm's thinking takes both the personal and communal effects of sin seriously and addresses the felt need for forgiveness and the desire to make amends.[38] His view of God's love resembles, as Nuth notes, the notion of "tough love,"[39] in which a person in power curbs a moral inferior (child, criminal, addict) "for their own good." In contrast, Julian's mystical experience and long meditation on it teaches her that the fact of sin is not what matters most. Instead, the overarching reality is God's love.[40] As a result, Julian does not emphasize the social order as such (as Anselm does) but focuses her attention on the "personal relationship" that existed ideally between lord and vassal and exists in reality between God and humans.[41]

Building on Nuth's work, Jane McAvoy observes that underneath Anselm's assertion that humans are unable to satisfy God—thus necessitating the incarnation to accomplish atonement—"is the premise that humans ought to satisfy God."[42] This leads to a "startling conclusion": that salvation is a "divine need and the work of salvation is properly a human action."[43] Julian makes the opposite point. In the ninth revelation, Jesus looks at Julian and asks, "Are you pleased?" "Yes," she replies. Then he says, "If you are pleased, then I am pleased."[44] In Julian's view, the "reason for the mission of Christ is not human sin but human satisfaction."[45] God does not need to be satisfied; we do. This is the case because Julian understands wrath as the reality of human imperfection rather than objective defiance of God's will. For her, the fall is not primarily willful disobedience. Instead, sin is "something humans suffer

37. Nuth, "Two Medieval Soteriologies," 616, emphasis added.

38. Ibid, 622.

39. Ibid, 629.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid, 631.

42. Jane McAvoy, *The Satisfied Life: Medieval Women Mystics on Atonement* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 15.

43. Ibid.

44. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/52958/52958-h/52958-h.htm#THE_TWELFTH_REVELATION, 47. "Then said our good Lord Jesus Christ: *Art thou well pleased that I suffered for thee?* I said: *Yea, good Lord, I thank Thee; Yea, good Lord, blessed mayst Thou be.* Then said Jesus, our kind Lord: *If thou art pleased, I am pleased. . .*" In some versions of the Long Text, "pleased" is rendered "satisfied," which strengthens the connection with, and contrast to, Anselm's satisfaction metaphor of atonement.

45. McAvoy, *The Satisfied Life*, 21.

from, whatever their degree of personal guilt might be."[46] While blame is certainly part of human experience, the act of blaming is "a human reaction, not a divine one."[47] Julian points out that part of what contributes to our suffering and separation from God is our focus: We get caught up in our imperfectability rather than trusting in God's love. The hell we live in is of our own making.

That we create our own hells is partly the result of our time-boundedness: Nothing is more gripping than our current experience and understanding. Unlike us, however, God looks at the present in light of both past and, more importantly, future. Thus, God sees each moment, and our suffering and sin, in light of God's already accomplished setting of all things right. This is the import of Julian's famous quote, "All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well."[48] Spoken to her by Jesus, these words communicate the "eternal framework of God" where harm and blame are no longer operative.[49]

Anselm, Julian, and the Remediation of Ordinary Harm

Setting Julian's and Anselm's stories side by side, especially in the context of their larger soteriological frames, makes theological space for the existence and the remediation of ordinary harm in both its moral (Anselm) and non-moral (Julian) expressions. Anselm's thinking is in continuity with contemporary moral philosophers: Moral harm needs moral atonement, or what we usually call *forgiveness*.[50] A reciprocal performance of his atonement metaphor requires us, as those who have been forgiven by God, to become quick to confess when we have done ordinary moral wrong and skillful in apologizing for it—and to offer forgiveness to those who confess and make amends to us.

While this work is not complicated, it is difficult. Most of us likely need more practice with simple frameworks like "a better way to say sorry." Popularized by a former teacher who learned it in a teacher training program, the formula goes as follows: "I'm sorry for. . . . This is wrong because. . . . In the future, I will. . . . Will you forgive me?"[51] As one simple example: "I am sorry I cheated at Monopoly. Cheating is wrong because it makes a game unfair. In the future, I will count correctly so that I do not

46. Nuth, "Two Medieval Soteriologies," 635.

47. McAvoy, *The Satisfied Life*, 17.

48. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/52958/52958-h/52958-h.htm#THE_THIRTEENTH_REVELATION, 56.

49. McAvoy, *The Satisfied Life*, 21.

50. Voiss, *Rethinking Christian Forgiveness*, 40.

51. http://www.cuppacocoa.com/a-better-way-to-say-sorry/.

always get to buy Boardwalk. Will you forgive me?" While this sounds trivial, it points out something both children and adults value: fairness and equity. A more consequential scenario perhaps makes the point more clearly: "I am sorry I did not tell you I bought $150 running shoes. That was wrong because we agreed we would decide together about purchases of more than $50. In the future, I will check in with you before I spend that kind of money. Will you forgive me?"

In contrast to Anselm, Julian's thinking rings true with what some contemporary psychologists have suggested: that it is more the "perception of harm as harm" rather than the necessity for moral judgment of the harm that "triggers the possibility that one might respond with forgiveness."[52] In addition, in her focus on the relationship between Lord and servant, Julian draws our attention to the deep human need for connection—and for the ways in which shaking that attachment is an experience of non-moral harm.

Attachment theory, which focuses on that human need for connection, grows out of the work of the twentieth-century British psychiatrist John Bowlby. Commissioned by the World Health Organization to study children left orphaned by World War II, Bowlby drew the conclusion that "emotional" nutrition was as important for the growth and thriving of children as physical nutrition. While originally focused on the attunement of parents to children, Bowlby's attachment theory has more recently been applied to adult relationships as well. Because an emphasis on attachment is still "radically out of line with our culture's established social and psychological ideas of adulthood: that maturity means being independent and self-sufficient,"[53] we tend to underplay it, including in our conversations about atonement. Yet other than accidentally spilling tea on someone (or some comparable minor and unintended physical injury), one important hallmark of non-moral ordinary harm is that it disrupts our sense of needed and wanted connections with important others. What happens to leftover green beans does not really matter; knowing your spouse sees your work and values both you and it does.

The others to whom we are connected may be family members, colleagues, people in our congregations, or neighbors. The degree to which they matter to us varies. Perhaps, as Voiss theorizes, the harm we have experienced is primarily the result of shaking our matrix of meanings. In all cases, however, the remedy is rarely if ever achievable on our own. It requires others. It is here that Julian's clarity about the Lord's care for the servant's pain is so helpful. A reciprocal performance of

52. Voiss, *Rethinking Christian Forgiveness,* 99.

53. Sue Johnson, *Hold Me Tight: Your Guide to the Most Successful Approach to Building Loving Relationships* (London: Piatkus, an imprint of Little, Brown Book Group, 2011), 19.

atonement from the perspective of Julian of Norwich involves the (re)establishment of relationship with others, something we can envision and enact because "God first loved us."[54]

However, if we approach attachment disruptions first from the perspective of moral harm, looking for confessions and apologies, we might make things worse and will likely also fail to address our real needs. Psychologist Sue Johnson even states that unless we attend to "the fundamental need for connection and the fear of losing it," all other standard conflict mediation or communication techniques are "misguided and ineffectual."[55] If you come home at midnight when I was expecting you at 9:30 p.m., my demanding an apology will not make sense to you and will not address the fact that I was terrified you had been in a car accident. Telling me I was needlessly worried is not on point either. I am glad you are all right, and I want you to text me the next time an event runs substantially longer than you expect. Yet what I really need is for you to see my fear and address it. I want you to know how much you mean to me and I want to know how much I mean to you. Atonement is not only about confession and repentance. It is also about meeting our need to be connected.

The possibility of first attending to the experience of harm rather than moving immediately to establish (or defend from) blame might also be helpful in remedying ordinary moral harm. Recognizing that the harm we experience lands not in the abstract but in the context of relationships means we can start our conversation with "that hurt me" rather than "you're wrong" and "no I'm not." That you omitted to tell me about your shoe purchase is not only about the money you spent; it is also about the fact that you did not tell *me*, your partner. That I gave you a worse grade than you deserve because I am annoyed with you is not only about lack of fairness; it is also about the fact that I took advantage of my power over you as your teacher. I broke the trust on which a good learning environment is built. Both in the giving and receiving of ordinary moral harm, part of the harm is relational. So if we attend only to the (im)morality of what you or I said or did, we leave out a crucial component of atonement—the connection that unites us.

Sound and Life-Giving Doctrine: Metaphor and Analysis that Lead to Practice

Vanhoozer suggests that for doctrine to be alive and operable in people's lives, three components are needed: (1) lush metaphors and

54. 1 Jn. 4:19 (*Common English Bible*).

55. Johnson, 34.

(2) crisp analysis that (3) lead to practice. Anselm and Julian provide two such metaphors in their stories discussed above. These metaphors are spacious enough that we can find our place in both. We know from the inside what it is like to do (or receive) wrong and also to experience harm whether or not we or others are responsible for it. And we know the deep longing for that harm to be remediated.

Analyzing these two metaphors in concert helps surface both a gift and a shadow of Mennonite theology and points toward a kind of practice that lives into the gift without succumbing to the shadow. Those in the Anabaptist stream believe that we cannot fully know Christ unless we follow Christ in life.[56] The good in this idea is that our insides ought to match our outsides: Conversion involves transformation. Many in the Anabaptist stream rightly resonate with Anselm's emphasis on the need for human cooperation with God's work of redemption. We recognize that the slave in this story has a worthy job to do, that he needs to repent of his disobedience, and that he must make amends for the consequences of his failure to carry out his responsibilities. We know that faith is not only about what we believe, so we encourage volunteerism, donate money to good causes, and support peace and justice activists. We pay attention to power differentials and eschew both interpersonal and systemic violence. We know that when we fail and disobey, our failure and disobedience have consequences in the world around us, consequences we need to help remediate. This emphasis on right behavior is a valuable gift, and it contributes not only to the formation of ethical people but also to the good of the world around us.

Yet an unintended consequence of this emphasis on human responsibility is that it reinforces the notion that it is up to us alone to make things right. This is where Julian's story can be so helpful. Inhabiting it, we begin to recognize and name the myriad ways in which we both experience and contribute to harm and the extent to which we are dependent on God for remedy regardless of our responsibility for that harm. We come to claim, with Julian, that salvation is "a process of transformation that begins with personal healing and leads to social justice."[57] This helps us see that the most productive starting point for remediating harm is not always (or maybe even often) moral outrage. If we can understand that both we and others are like Julian's servant, stuck in pain in a ravine, we can recognize in ourselves and others the deep need for healing that is part of every experience of harm—moral and non-moral—for everyone involved. We can begin by "letting Jesus do us a little

56. Hans Denk, "The Contention that Scripture Says," in *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1981), 87.

57. McAvoy, *The Satisfied Life*, 7.

good."[58] And we can give our harm-partner to God and allow Jesus to do him or her a little good as well.

Giving ourselves and others the space for healing and self-examination opens up territory that is impossible to imagine when we rush in self-righteously, assuming we know all that needs to be known and convinced that if we do not solve the problem, no one will. The need to slow things down and focus first on well-being (ours and that of others) will not be needed to the same extent in all circumstances or all relationships. Nevertheless, a non-reactive approach will make it possible to discern the nature of the harm, whether it is moral or non-moral, who (if anyone) is to blame, and what is a productive next step—all of which is difficult if not impossible when we are under duress.

Finally, as I noted at the outset, a profound recognition of our own neediness can help counteract discipleship as a practice of a "spirituality of striving," to borrow a phrase from my colleague Malinda Berry. When we see ordinary harm, both moral and non-moral, through the lens of Julian's theology, we recognize that we do not need to satisfy God. God is already satisfied. Thus, we can rest in the realization that "God does not love us because we are good; God loves us because God is good."[59] In God's goodness lies our atonement.

58. I've borrowed this phrase from my colleague Allan Rudy-Froese, who tells his homiletics students that they must first study the text and allow "Jesus to do them a little good" before they are ready to preach the gospel.

59. Richard Rohr, *On the Threshold of Transformation*: *Daily Meditations for Men* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2010), 87.