

I'M TRYING TO GET TO KNOW JESUS

Kate Harline

For a good portion of my life, I didn't understand how Jesus fit into the equation. I prayed to Heavenly Father and so I felt like I had some sort of connection to him because I talked to him. And I had often felt the presence of the Holy Ghost so there were some tangible experiences with that member of the Godhead. But I never talked to Jesus and I never felt him in my bosom, so I felt a little confused about how to connect with this brother of mine for whom I quite instinctively have always felt a deep love, even without—it seemed—much contact.

When I was eighteen, I left Orem, Utah, where I had grown up to attend an evangelical Christian university in Seattle. There, I encountered a whole culture (and myriad subcultures) of what we might call “born-again” Christianity and suddenly Jesus was everywhere. I loved how my new friends and peers could talk about him so easily. I loved how he was the obvious center of their devotion, worship, and lives, and how they were even on a first name basis with him—actually calling him Jesus! I almost immediately started participating in worship nights, attending different churches with friends (in addition to attending my YSA ward), and overall immersing myself in this Jesus-loving culture. It was so nourishing to my Jesus-longing soul and I felt like I was beginning to better understand how Jesus can be an evident part of a person's life. Sure, while growing up I heard talk of Christ in church, and from my family and friends, and in seminary, but the religiosity I encountered at my university in Seattle was just so explicitly Jesus-centric. I often felt “holy envy” toward my friends when they would pray directly to “Jesus” or “Lord Jesus”—and then during the prayer would refer to him as You

instead of Thee—it all seemed so intimate. I longed for more of that personal connection to Jesus in my own spirituality.

I have thought a lot about why for so long I felt so distant from Jesus in my Mormon experience—and why I sometimes still do. Surely there is residue of past rhetoric that Jesus is not a being with whom we *should* create a personal connection (thank you, Brother McConkie), and there are probably many other factors. But whatever the reasons, I find that common ways of talking about and thinking about Christ and “The Atonement” in Mormon communities have had the unfortunate effect in my personal spiritual strivings of either diminishing Jesus to no more than a footnote, or whitewashing him into an almost unrecognizable figure. With a little boost from my interactions with Christians of other denominations, and through my experiences in years since, I’ve tried to find ways to connect more meaningfully to Jesus within the context of Mormonism. I share a few of my ideas in the hopes that some of this may be helpful to others as well.

First, I have come to realize that no matter how good or not-bad I may be, I am still a sinner in need of Jesus. It has been important for me to recognize that sin is more than committing sin—sin is also a state. Individual sins (like, thoughts or acts that are wrong and contrary to eternal truth) are not the deepest layer of sinfulness. Sins are the surface-level symptoms of a deeper sickness, the state in which we find ourselves by virtue of being mortal, “fallen” humans and being separated from God in this, our current “probationary state” (Alma 12:24). We *all* “come short of the glory of God” as Paul said in Romans (3:23), or as King Benjamin taught, we are *all* beggars (Mosiah 4:19).

There is a story in the New Testament in which Jesus is confronted because he ate with people who were considered obvious sinners. Jesus’ response is “They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick” (Matthew 9:12). For so long, when I heard this story I *wished* that I were one of the “sick”—one of the obviously sinful and derelict, so that I could be one of the ones who Jesus hung out with! It wasn’t that

I fancied myself perfect, it's that I fancied myself a "good girl" who, because she never had and never foresaw herself doing something *really* horrible, figured she would never *really* "need" to "use" the Atonement, besides for some minor offenses.

But what I had so totally wrong was that I am one of those sinners, no matter how much I keep the commandments or don't do "bad stuff." I need Jesus, and I belong at that sick table every day, whether I commit some blatant act considered sinful or not. As the Mormon writer and philosopher Adam Miller puts it: "Being a good person doesn't mean you're not a sinner. Sin goes deeper. Being good will save you a lot of trouble, but it won't solve the problem of sin. Only God can do this. Fill your basket with good apples rather than bad ones, but, in the end, sin has as much to do with the basket as with the apples."¹

It seems that the difference between "they that be whole" and "they that are sick" is simply a question of awareness. "They that be whole" are actually also sick but they live under the illusion that they are righteous of their own accord and thus think they are whole and thus do not seek out the Physician. But Jesus is not a backup plan to perfect obedience or a referral on a list of resources for when times get really tough and we need some extra "enabling power."

I believe we are healed through a constant relationship with Jesus, not through his occasional dropping into our lives when we think we need him most. I am a clinical social worker and I practice as a psychotherapist. Compelling research and evidence suggests that the *most* important factor in determining a positive therapeutic outcome is a trusting therapeutic relationship—that is, more than the method or approach used in therapy, or even the skill of the therapist at employing that method, the relationship and trust built between the therapist and client is the most telling predictor of a positive outcome. In a similar vein, I feel that comfort and change through Christ is less like a prescription

1. Adam S. Miller, *Letters to a Young Mormon* (Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2013), 17.

that might read something like “Access Atonement. Apply twice daily until symptoms decrease” and more like creating and maintaining a long-term, trusting relationship with the Great Healer himself.

A few years ago, I worked as a social worker at a domestic violence shelter. One of my clients, who I will call April, had been abusing heavy drugs for the better part of twenty years. Her life had been shaped not only by her drug abuse but by an abusive childhood. She had narrowly escaped with her life from an extremely violent partner and all her children had been raised in foster care. April had been a regular visitor to the cesspools of darkness, despair, and desperation and at some point when she hit rock bottom she had sought out Jesus. I was saddened to find out last November that April had died of an overdose. I attended her funeral services with dozens of other people who had been touched by April in some way. Her obituary read, “She found her clear path and truth as a Christian and was baptized a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when she began a new life. The Serenity Prayer gave her comfort and peace.”

Someone like April is who we generally think of when we think of “they that are sick.” But if someone like me, who has never been “tormented with the pains of hell” (Alma 36:13) so explicitly as April has, strips myself of the illusions of my own righteousness and of the false security afforded me by thoughts of being one of “they that be whole,” I come to discover that I, too, am sick and in great need of “the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah” (2 Nephi 2:8).

Secondly, I have found that even though I may never fully “understand” the Atonement, it is helpful to try to gain insight into it. I have sometimes thought about how incomprehensible it is that Jesus could suffer for everybody. At times, it has seemed so inconceivable that I have figuratively thrown up my hands and said, “I will never understand the Atonement!” I have heard similar sentiments expressed many times at church, in general conference, and elsewhere. But this attitude keeps us from searching for deeper insight, which in turn distances us from Christ.

I recently learned that astrophysicists have determined that before the universe began about 13.7 billion years ago, “all the space . . . matter and . . . energy of the known universe was contained in a volume less than one trillionth the size of the point of a pin.”² If all the energy of the universe could somehow be contained in an area one trillionth the size of a pinpoint, then perhaps the relatively “small” moment of time of Christ’s life and suffering can in some mysterious but real way contain *all* suffering. Perhaps it’s that through his life and atonement (a relatively small “pinpoint” in comparison to the expanse of the history of the earth and eternity), his vision and understanding were expanded (like the matter and energy of the universe was) to comprehend all the suffering that ever was or would be.

Because he allowed himself to be engulfed by sorrow, suffering, and pain, he has the capacity to imagine exactly how it feels to be you or me or April or anybody. Sometimes I think of the Atonement as the way in which Christ gained the Ultimate Imagination. Often we call this imagination, empathy. Alma described it like this, “And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people. And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities” (Alma 7:11–12).

It seems that we humans also have quite a bit of capacity for empathetic imagination. Every time we suffer because someone else is suffering, every time we “mourn with those who mourn,” every time we extend mercy and forgiveness, or every time (to quote Joseph Smith) “we look with compassion on perishing souls . . . [and] feel that we want to take them upon our shoulders, and cast their sins behind our backs,” we are

2. “A Brief History of Everything, feat. Neil deGrasse Tyson,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7KYTJ8tBoZ8&feature=youtu.be>.

employing our empathetic imagination, and thereby emulating Jesus. In this way, I believe our everyday experience can help us to understand the Atonement.

I currently work as a therapist at an agency where all my clients are people of refugee and immigrant background who have survived torture, war trauma, and other severe human rights abuses. Working in this setting, I have become acquainted with a phenomenon familiar to many who work directly with those who have been severely traumatized called “vicarious traumatization.” Basically, in being a witness to and interacting so closely with the stories and lives of people who have experienced such horrific trauma, a therapist can begin to experience symptoms that are normally associated with post-traumatic stress disorder *even though the trauma did not happen directly to them*. It is as though what happened to the client had happened to the therapist. This is an extreme and unhealthy example of empathetic imagination, but it illustrates to what extent we humans are able to vicariously suffer—like Jesus did and does.

Third, I try to focus on Jesus, the Person behind the Atonement, to avoid thinking of the Atonement as an abstract entity. I minored in English in college and actually find grammar somewhat exciting. A pronoun is a word (such as he, she, they, and it) that replaces a noun, and an antecedent is the noun that has been replaced by the pronoun. I have frequently observed language used about the Atonement sounding something like this: “The Atonement can heal us. It can pull us out of sin. It can cleanse us.” In this example, “the Atonement” is the antecedent and the pronoun that replaces it is “it.” “It” is a pronoun that denotes a thing, so, whether we mean to or not, when we say something like this, we are referring to the Atonement as a *thing*. The Atonement also sounds like a thing when used in common phrases like “apply the Atonement” and “access the Atonement” because “apply” and “access” are verbs we usually use in reference to things, not people. It is spiritually beneficial to me to focus on the Person behind the Atonement and avoid referring

to it as an entity of itself. So, in an effort to focus more on Christ the Person, if I heard someone say “The Atonement can heal us. It can pull us out of sin. It can cleanse us,” I might rephrase it to myself as, “Jesus can heal us. He can pull us out of sin. He can cleanse us.”

You can imagine I was pleased to hear Russell M. Nelson speak about this very thing in a recent Conference talk. He said,

It is doctrinally incomplete to speak of the Lord’s atoning sacrifice by shortcut phrases, such as “the Atonement” or “the enabling power of the Atonement” or “applying the Atonement” or “being strengthened by the Atonement.” These expressions present a real risk of misdirecting faith by treating the *event* as if *it* had living existence and capabilities independent of our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ.

There is no amorphous entity called “the Atonement” upon which we may call for succor, healing, forgiveness, or power. Jesus Christ is the source. . . . The Savior’s atoning sacrifice—the central act of all human history—is best understood and appreciated when we expressly and clearly connect it to Him.³

To continue with my grammar spiel, I also like to think of *atonement* as a verb and not just a noun. As a verb, it is something that is constantly happening—Jesus is perpetually atoning for me because he is always providing grace that allows me to “live and move and have [my] being” (Acts 17:28). This puts Christ’s role in my life in the here-and-now, and not just the past, like in the present forms of the verbs in these lines from the hymn “Reverently and Meekly Now”: “At the throne I intercede; for thee ever do I plead” (*Hymns*, no. 185).

Fourth, I focus less on the Atonement as blood payment for sin and more as “at-one-ment.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* explains that the original meaning of the word “atonement” refers to unity or uniting. The word “atone” is derived from a combination of the two words

3. Russell M. Nelson, “Drawing the Power of Jesus Christ into Our Lives,” April 2017, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2017/04/drawing-the-power-of-jesus-christ-into-our-lives?lang=eng>.

“at” and “one” and means “the condition of being at one with others.” Although we don’t pronounce this word “at-one-ment” anymore, this understanding of the term helps to emphasize the purpose of Christ’s at-one-ment as bringing us into one-ness with God and with others.

Jesus seems to care a lot about this. Some of my favorite passages of scripture are Jesus’ prayers in 3 Nephi 19 and in John 17, and in both, Jesus prays for one-ness. “And now Father, I pray unto thee for them . . . that they may believe in me, that I may be in them as thou, Father, art in me, that we may be one” (3 Nephi 19:23). And in John, in what we now call the Intercessory Prayer (John 17:21–23), Jesus prays: “That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us. . . . And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one. . . .”

It sounds to me that Jesus desires unity, one-ness, harmony, between himself and the Father, between him and us, and between us and others. He is the Way by which we become at-one with God and at-one with our fellow children of God. This, I believe, is the essence of his purpose and being, and is the force that we must use limited words to describe as “the Atonement.” I love him for this and I also pray for this same unity.

I say these things in Jesus’ holy name, Amen.