



KALAMAZOO

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

Sermons

Me, Repent? What For?

April 2, 2017 – Fifth Sunday in Lent

Daniel 9.3-10, Mark 1.9-15
The Rev. Lawrence W. Farris

How we are doing in this holy season of Lent, now that we're more than half way through? Perhaps not a bad time to pause and ask ourselves, "How's it going?", it being the spiritual and moral spring cleaning appropriate to the season. Historically, Lent was a season of penitence and heightened spiritual discipline - almsgiving, fasting and prayer, in particular. But as with so much in our 'you deserve a break today/have it your way' world, such practices seem increasingly old fashioned, arcane, passé. Though we are haunted more often than we admit by the suspicion that God longs for our ethical commitments to be enacted and not just articulated, Lent as a season of penitence seems rather outmoded, almost an embarrassment to the church of today. Indeed, many churches can no longer be bothered with a weekly prayer of confession, finding it far too much of a downer. After all, outside the birds are singing, the crocuses are blooming, the air is redolent of spring; and inside, many of us are pretty persuaded we are pretty darn lovable. Can't we just get on to Easter, to the good part, and let the old customs of Lent slip away into the dustbin where so much now deemed useless resides, even the word dustbin?

But again, I ask, "How's our annual spring cleaning of our souls going?" I included quite a thoroughgoing list of sins in our prayer of confession this morning. I can't speak for you, but that list makes me squirm and reminds me that I need to squirm beneath all my protestations of my virtue. Let me be plain. In the gospel, the first words out of Jesus' mouth are offered in the imperative tense; they are a command, and that command is "Repent." And lent is the season in which to do so.

Maybe repentance is more common in our culture. I'm pretty sure there are election pollsters from last fall who are still repenting of having overlooked so many folks who dwell out here in flyover country. And I'm pretty sure a good many of the 35% of adult Americans who think Obamacare and the Affordable Care Act are two different programs may someday repent of their ignorance. When the famous – athletes, film stars, politicians – get caught doing something that falls into that broad category of human activity called "sin," they often plead regret for making a mistake, and their admirers flock to call for them to be given a second chance after behavior that would land common folk in jail. I suspect their repentance is over having gotten caught, not the deed itself. Then again, it's always easier to see what others, rather than ourselves, need to repent of.

All of which is to say, repentance has fallen on hard times, both within and without the church. And that's too bad. It was said of President Abraham Lincoln that 'he matured best in sorrow,' and that's true for most of us, truth be told, and for Christians, that means sorrow for our sins. True self-esteem is built not on fables we tell ourselves about ourselves but on an honest assessment of who we are in the eyes and expectations of God. And as repentance is the gateway to receiving the forgiveness that is ours in Christ, seems like we might want to be serious about it, at least during Lent.

Our prayer of confession today is meant to emphasize our behavior, our choices, the actions we take or fail to take. Because that's what we need to confess. Confession - appropriate, honest confession - does not mean that we are inherently awful people who always get it wrong, but rather that we are people who regularly don't do the right we know. Deep down we know that. That's what we hear in Daniel's prayer of confession in our Old Testament lesson, a long, honest lament for his, and his peoples', failings. Thanks, be to God for our weekly prayer of confession as it affords us a place to do something with and about our sin. Confession is what gives us the awareness that we have the ability to make different and better choices. Honestly naming where we have failed as Christians, as human beings, means we can be opened to see alternatives going forward. Although we are often compared in scripture to rather hapless sheep, we do, in fact, have agency, a measure of power – and it is yet another sin not to use that agency in the service of

God. Confession makes us aware that we can – not always, not perfectly, to be sure – but that we can do differently and better, by the grace of God. Seeing and moving towards that better choice doesn't come clear to us without confession. Denial of responsibility takes us nowhere. Confession is the first step towards change.

Now, repentance doesn't mean just feeling badly about our failures and hoping the feeling passes so we can get back to business as usual. Jesus did not come saying, feel terrible but don't do anything. He said, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand" as if to suggest that if we commit ourselves to honest assessment of our wrongs and shortcomings, we make ourselves available and useful for the kingdom that God is always bringing into our midst, for those with eyes and hearts to see.

Perhaps you have followed the many months long protest in North Dakota against the Dakota Access Pipeline. Throughout the cold of winter, against harsh pushback by civil authorities, and in the face of powerful forces who wanted the pipeline finished, still the protest went on. I have been struck by the large numbers of military veterans joining the Native peoples there, often positioning themselves between the Native Americans and civil authorities. Some months ago, a group of those veterans engaged in a powerful act of repentance before the Lakota tribal elders. And the leader of those veterans spoke these words:

"Many of us, me particularly, are from the units that have hurt you over the many years. We came. We fought you. We took your land. We signed treaties that we broke. We stole minerals from your sacred hills. We blasted the faces of our presidents onto your sacred mountain. . . . we took still more land and then we took your children and then we tried to . . . eliminate your language that . . . the Creator gave you. We didn't respect you, we polluted your Earth, we've hurt you in so many ways but we've come to say that we are sorry. We are at your service and we beg for your forgiveness."

And then those veterans knelt before the elders. Astonishing words, an astonishing moment, of repentance. And the elders broke into song that such a moment should ever come to pass. And the veterans did not just speak the words, did not just humble themselves, they have stayed.

So, repentance is about honestly naming our failings, offering them to God, and trusting that God can forgive us, renew us and empower us for usefulness to the kingdom. And it begins by being honest and specific about our sin.

In her book *Accidental Saints*, the Reverend Nadia Bolz-Weber writes how her thinking about sin and forgiveness has evolved. She writes, in her own irreverent and insightful way:

Forgiveness of sins is a tricky business. In my childhood, I was taught that all the not-perfect things we do or say or think are all tallied up on some big spiritual dry-erase board in heaven. This is, of course, what God mostly busies himself with. A sin is a sin is a sin, I was told. So, red marks both for someone who murders and for someone who thinks to herself that her teacher is a real [idiot]. I was told that when Jesus came and died on the cross, he wiped all those red marks away; but before Jesus, we had to get priests to offer sacrifices on our behalf in order for the marks to go away. And let's be honest . . . that's a lot of dead goats and pigeons. So, God sent his son to be the sacrifice for everyone once and for all. (I understand why that would be good news for goats and pigeons, but I'm less clear on why that's good news for me.) By sacrificing Jesus, God put the eraser in our hands, so that now, if we confess our sins and feel terrible for every bad deed, word, or thought, and if we promise not to do, say, or think those things again, then the marks are erased. And when it comes down to it, God is pleased with us only when we have a clean board . . .

This view of sin and punishment is perhaps not as commonly held as it was in previous generations, so I'm not sure how many people believe that God is holding a big grudge against them for being bad. . . .

But honestly, I'm much more tortured by my [sin], which eat away at me, than I am concerned about God being mad at me. I'm more haunted by how what I've said and the things I've done have caused harm to myself and others than I am worried that God will punish me for being bad. Because, in the end, we aren't punished *for* our sins as much as we are punished *by* our sins.

And sin is just the state of human brokenness in which what we say and do causes these sometimes tiny and sometimes monstrous fractures in our earth, in ourselves, in those we love, and sometimes even in our own bodies. . . . And it's not something we can avoid entirely.

This idea - that we are punished by our sins, not for them - is crucial. Clarence Jordan, the Southern Baptist pastor who translated the New Testament into what he titled *The Cotton Patch Version*, once said that the laws of God are natural laws, like the law of gravity, and as such, are unbreakable. We can get up on top of our church and proclaim we don't accept the law of gravity and jump off. But what we find out is that we don't break the law of gravity, it breaks us. We don't break the law of gravity, Jordan said, we just illustrate it. And so, it is with God's laws. We don't break the law of God, it is unbreakable. We just illustrate it. We are punished by our sins, not for them.

When we repent of our sin, in part so that it will stop punishing us, we find ourselves freed for the work of God's kingdom, the very work for which every single one of us was created. But, of course, there is a danger in that moment when we name and then turn from all those sins we named earlier this morning. A vacuum is thereby created, and it must be filled with something - hopefully, new choices, new behavior, new life patterns. Ask anyone who's overcome an addiction - it's not enough to end the attachment to the substance or behavior or person to which one looked for solace; new habits and associations must be put in its place, lest the old reassert itself. I believe it was the great theologian of the last century Karl Barth who said, "It is true that the old Adam is drowned in our baptism, but that old Adam is also an expert swimmer." Just so. In a recent editorial in *The Christian Century*, Peter Marty wrote:

Most of the really important things we do in life we do according to habits acquired over long stretches of time. A good life imbued with virtue is one shaped by intentional acts that are too precious to be left to haphazard behavior. Virtues don't just magically appear in us the day someone cuts our umbilical cord. We learn generosity, reverence and love over time, and we learn qualities such as these from other people. Transforming the virtues, we observe into personal disciplines that become ingrained habits - this is what shapes an interior self and external being worth knowing. It's what readies us for serving the Lord most capably.

I wrote this morning's Prayer of Confession based on a prayer offered by our Jewish sisters and brothers during their annual period of repentance called Yom Kippur. It is a prayer in the form of an alphabetical acrostic, a sin for every letter of the alphabet. That's a lot of sins, and not even the worst among us have managed all twenty-six. Most of us excel in just a few. That's why we pray the prayer together and for one another.

Now, I want to invite you to take the prayer home with you and spend some time with it. Read it slowly, pray it slowly, and see which of those sins makes you squirm most, where you most bristle at being called out, where your resentment most blossoms. Those are the sins that matter for you. And then offer all that to God in the name of Jesus, and wait to see to what new person or activity or pattern the Holy Spirit will open to you, will lead you to. And when that is clear, step towards it, away from the sin and, in forgiven freedom, toward a new possibility for service to God's kingdom. Try this, in the days of Lent which remain.

Perhaps I've told you nothing new this morning. I do believe confession, specific and honest confession, matters, and matters greatly. I do believe that we're punished more by our sins than for them. I believe we must form new habits in our freedom when, prodded by guilt, we turn towards new life. And it also remains true that we are not saved by our works but for them. We are saved by grace; it doesn't all depend upon us, not even upon the quality of our confession and repentance, thanks be to God. And I believe we are also called, called to serve the kingdom of our gracious God, and unrepented sin gets in the way of that service. And Lent is the season of repentance.

I'm an old preacher, so let me close with an old preacher's story. A good man died and found himself face to face with St. Peter. St. Peter said, "Welcome. We need to do a life review with you before we can open the gates to heaven for you, and you need to score 1000 points on this life review to get in. Tell me what you've done in your life that was worthwhile." Well, the fellow was humble enough to be embarrassed to be put on the spot to list his accomplishments, but he started in, listing the patterns he'd tried to live by –how he had tried to serve the Lord Jesus, how he'd tried to be a good husband and father and grandfather and friend, how he'd been active in church, worshipped most every Sunday, tithed his income, taught Sunday school, served on the board, worked with the youth, helped at the soup kitchen, ushered. After he'd gone on for a while, St. Peter said, "Well done. All that's worth one point. Anything else?" Well, the man thought some more, and he started to sweat at the thought he'd only gotten one of the 1000 points needed. And then he proceeded to list all his community service – active in scouting, been on the park commission, active in a service club, volunteered in his kids' school booster programs, coached soccer, visited regularly at a nursing home, and so forth. St. Peter said, "That's terrific. And all that is worth one more point." And at this the man's face fell, his shoulders slumped, his heart sank. After a few silent moments, he looked at St. Peter and confessed, "The only way I'm going to get in here is by the grace of God." "That's right," said St. Peter, "and that's worth 998 points. Enter into the joy of your salvation."

My beloved in Christ, we make not one, but two offerings in worship each Sunday. One comes towards the end of the service when we rededicate our lives to Christ through the offering of our time, talent and treasure to the work of Christ's kingdom. The other comes towards the beginning of the service when we offer our sin to God that God may transform it in us. I do not believe we are saved by the quality of either offering. That happens only by grace. But I do believe that we continually grow and mature in faith through both. And there's still two weeks of Lent left to do both. Again, I ask, "How's that spring cleaning of your soul going?"

Let those who have ears, hear. Amen