

RECOVERING REPENTANCE

GENESIS 32:22-30; LUKE 15:11-32

MARCH 10, 2002

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I'll never forget the shock William Sloane Coffin expressed from the pulpit of Battell Chapel after Lyndon Johnson announced he would not seek re-election. Coffin was the great civil rights/anti-war preacher who rankled a generation of conservative Republican parents of liberal college students.

What shocked Coffin was the response of anti-war activists the day after President Johnson said to the nation he would not seek re-election. "You would have thought there would be dancing in the streets," Coffin said. "The great nemesis of the anti-war movement, the one who escalated the war and the loss of American lives admits defeat and his opponents are depressed?!"

How could this be, wondered Coffin. Upon reflection he concluded this, he concluded it is easier to stay stuck in the old life than to start making changes that bring new life. It is easier to stoke the coals of revenge than to begin the process of healing and wholeness.

Several years ago Ashley Montague called this condition "psychosclerosis," a hardening not of the arteries as in arteriosclerosis, but of the spirit. As a result, the mind cannot see and embrace new ideas, the heart cannot stay vulnerable. Sufferers of psychosclerosis deaden themselves against life in order to go on living. They sell their freedom as the price of their self-perpetuation.

Have you ever heard yourself or someone else say something like, "No, I think I'll just keep my mouth shut and endure my marital problems." Or, "Some day I'll sit down and have a good long talk with the kids but I don't want to rock the boat now." Or this, "Too bad the rest of the world doesn't have America's wealth, but I guess we just have to hope for the best."

Psychosclerosis. It is quite common. If you suspect you have some of the symptoms you are in good company. It was St. Theresa, the great Spanish saint, who upon reading Augustine's *Confessions*, sighed and said, "I see myself there reflected." And who wouldn't see himself or herself reflected in one who prays, "O God make me a Christian but not quite yet." We see ourselves reflected in the Bible. In King Saul's jealousy for young David's success. Or in promise-making, promise-breaking Peter. Or certainly in the prodigal son and elder brother this morning: a striking contrast of a resilient heart and one that suffers a classic case of psychosclerosis.¹

We are in week three of a sermon series on sin. Week one we talked about the lost language of sin and evil – words we don't hear much but words important for our faith.

Week two we said paradoxically sin is our only hope because the language of sin is the only language that gives a true diagnosis of the human condition.

Today I want to talk with you about repentance – literally "to turn around" – to make changes that bring new life after we have used the language of sin to diagnose our souls.

I said a few weeks ago the sound of the word “repentance” is like hearing a fingernail dragged across a chalkboard. Piercing, painful, even tortuous. The meaning of the word has come unstitched from our day to day experience. It conjures up holier than thou preachers, waving bibles, bearing down on anyone in their path.

I am suggesting this is a hollow and counterfeit definition of repentance. Rather, if sin is the wake up call to the condition of our souls, to the extent to which we suffer from psychosclerosis, repentance is what we do after we wake up and know what our condition is.

Wordsworth once called the region of sin that place “where passions have the privilege to work and never hear the sound of their own names.”ⁱⁱ

Repentance is what happens when we use the language of salvation to name that which diverts and distracts us from being the people God intends us to be.

The prodigal son was operating in the region where he did not have names for his passions. They destroyed his relationships, now they were destroying his life. At last having squandered his money, out of food he finds himself sick and tired of being sick and tired. He finds himself in a crisis/opportunity – facing the choice of life or death.

It was then that that boy saw the truth of his situation. “He came to his senses” is what Luke says. I love that phrase. No longer deaf and dumb to his plight now he could see it for what it was.

The issues need not always be life and death. I heard a story recently about a mother and father who came to their senses. They were trying to get their teenagers to stop jumping up and talking on the phone during dinner. They wanted dinner to be family time. So they tried everything. First a simple rule against answering the phone during dinner. Then grounding if you violated the rule. Then they tried taking the phone off the hook during dinner. Nothing worked. Finally, one of the parents started sneaking out of the house before dinner each night with a Phillips-head screwdriver to actually disconnect the phone line on the side of the house. The boys thought the line was dead. The parents lied and said they’d have to call the phone company. Then the parents came to their senses. They realized how ridiculous the situation had become. They’d lost sight of their goal – a simple uninterrupted dinner – by going to crazy lengths enforcing rules.ⁱⁱⁱ

There is an old saying. Perhaps you have heard it. “The truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable.”

Like the prodigal son, like those parents we get to a place hopefully where we come to our senses. We find the right language to describe what we are actually doing to ourselves or to other people. We face the truth for the first time – miserable though it makes us. We decide to change.

Yet, just before we come to our senses, we are more comfortable living with our guilt or anger or disappointment than we are facing the damage, getting an estimate for the cost of repairs. We’d rather live with symptoms of life threatening disease, than get a diagnosis.

But once we submit to the truth, once we repent, we are empowered to change.

The prodigal son experienced his father's forgiveness. Jesus made clear the father in the parable is God. God waits with open arms for each one of us to come home. Waiting at the end of the road, scanning the horizon, longing to see the familiar form, then the familiar face. God forgives and accepts us but also loves us like the father of the prodigal boy – giving him the best of everything when he came back.

Psychosclerosis is a condition of fear. We are afraid of the diagnosis, we are afraid of facing up to the damage we've done. But God's love casts out fear. The opposite of love is not hate it is fear. To be healed means to have the courage and freedom not to endure marital problems, that is easy; but to face and resolve them; to talk to the kids right now; to seek to change the plight of the poor at home and abroad.^{iv}

Forgiveness rather than a stopping place then becomes, in the life of the repentant person, a starting place. It is the launching pad from which we endeavor to repair the damage.

The old word for this, a word in the vocabulary of the lost language of salvation, is penance. Penance never meant punishment. It means repair. Penance is a tool, one preacher said, for living into repentance.

Penance a century ago worked like this: if you stole some of your neighbor's vegetables your penance might be to weed their garden every other day for a month. If you slandered someone your penance might be to visit the households of those you talked to and set the record straight.^v

We can talk all we want about matters like evil, sin, and repentance and not have to worry about starting a new movement. Unlike Christmas and Easter, Hallmark is not likely to make much money from Lenten and Penance greeting cards.

But I think our congregation and the church in America would be well-served by paying more attention to these subjects. Some churches don't seem to give a hoot about repentance. There is no emphasis on self-evaluation and personal growth. No expectation for a change or cure. No-fault churches you could call them. Then there are churches you could call full-fault churches. They care too much about sin. They single people out. I actually heard of one church that has unwed pregnant teenage girls stand before the congregation to be ridiculed.

What we could use are more churches that foster true repentance.

Churches that neither tolerate sin on the one hand, nor let anyone off the hook of responsibility for sin on the other hand. You might call such churches communities of transformation. If the church is focussed on anything it ought to be on the progress we are making with our souls.

Alcoholics Anonymous comes to mind as an example of a community of transformation. Some groups within our Westminster family do as well: the Parents Forum, for example, is becoming a community of transformation, a group where parents find support and also hold one another accountable. Salvation in such a setting is not some metaphysical prize. It is the practical power to change our lives.^{vi}

When a person or a community accepts the cost for repairs amazing things can happen. In South Africa, for instance, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established by the government to give public testimony to the wrongs of apartheid.

The stories are remarkable. Even the government could not foresee the depth of healing that would result. A man who was blinded by police brutality said, “I feel that what had been making me sick all these years was the fact that I could not tell my story. But now, it feels like I got my sight back.”^{vii}

Story after story after story of a society repenting and healing.

Abraham Lincoln’s *Second Inaugural Address* was a statement of repentance and reconciliation for our nation.

When everyone in Washington expected and wanted him to preach victory and triumph in 1864 with the conclusion of the War all but official Lincoln instead struck a profoundly somber and penitent note in perhaps his greatest speech.

“With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan – to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”^{viii}

We see ourselves reflected not only in the weakness and waywardness of the biblical characters and heroes of our history but also in their struggles and strength. The great adventure that was Jacob’s life, according to Rabbi Harold Kushner, began with the effort to climb the ladder that comes to him in his first dream. A ladder reaching from heaven to earth. Bridging the gap between the potential for integrity that the Bible sees in the young Jacob and the fulfillment of that potential.

Like many of us Jacob started out naïve and trusting. Then, given his life circumstances, he turned deceitful, scheming and manipulative. But one night, years later, he meets his angel – the story we heard Doug read. It is a metaphor you could say for Jacob at first resisting, like many of us, the summons to become the person we are each capable of becoming.

Finally, he accepts the truth and pain it entailed emerging from the struggle injured and exhausted, limping on to the next chapter of his life. But whole and full of integrity. Reaching the potential God gave him for his new task leading the nation into its glorious future.^{ix}

The sermon next week, the final week of the series, will consider that kind of wholeness and integrity. “Righteousness” is the word the Bible uses. Another word in the vocabulary of the lost language of salvation.

But in closing let me say again psychosclerosis, hardening of the spirit, sin can be cured with repentance, when we turn around and embrace new life. The trick in life is to die young as late as possible. Not to die old as quickly as we can.

To repent is not so much something you do as something that happens to your life and relationships. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, ‘I’m sorry,’ than to the future and saying ‘Wow!’^x Amen.

Endnotes:

ⁱ William Sloane Coffin, “It’s Easier to be Guilty,” Sermon preached at Riverside Church, New York City, 11/13/77 – Coffin’s comment about Johnson is from my memory.

ⁱⁱ Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book XI, line 230. I found this quote in C.S.Lewis’ “The Dangers of National Repentance,” from God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics, edited by Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1970) 190.

ⁱⁱⁱ Laura and Malcolm Gauld, The Biggest Job You’ll Ever Have (New York: Scribners, 2002) 112. This is a great book on parenting, the Gaulds are associated with the Hyde School, Bath, ME.

^{iv} Coffin

^v Barbara Brown Taylor, Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation (Cambridge: Cowley, 2000) 91.

^{vi} Brown Taylor.... “communities of transformation” comes from Speaking of Sin. As I noted in an earlier sermon this sermon series is indebted to Brown Taylor for her insights and themes.

^{vii} Harold Kushner, Living a Life That Matters: Resolving the Conflict Between Conscience and Success (New York: Knopf, 2001) 77.

^{viii} Abraham Lincoln, “The Second Inaugural Address,” from Harvard Classics American Documents vol. 23 (New York: Colliers, 1911) 469.

^{ix} Kushner, 106.

^x Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (New York, Harper and Row, 1972) 79.