

Just Worship

October 30, 2022

Psalm 32:1-7; Isaiah 1:14-18

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“Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven . . . While I kept silent, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long . . . Then I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,” and you forgave the guilt of my sin.”

As Christians we are all aware of the power and importance of forgiveness. We see Jesus’ work here on earth to be primarily about forgiveness and reconciliation. Richard Rohr in his book, Things Hidden, says this, “My lifetime of studying Jesus would lead me to summarize all of his teaching inside of two prime ideas: forgiveness and inclusion. Don’t believe me; just go through the Gospels, story by story. It is rather self-evident. Forgiveness and inclusion are Jesus’ “great themes.”

As parents we teach our children at a very young age how to apologize, confess and be reconciled with others. Confession is more than a religious act, it is a human act to restore relationship and our human connection to one another and to our world, even if we don’t believe in God.

Being raised in a Roman Catholic home. I remember having to attend monthly confession time so that I would be cleansed of sin and worthy to receive communion. When I became born again, attending the evangelical church, confession of personal sin was also an important act expected of everyone. The Altar Call was a time to come before God following the sermon for anyone seeking forgiveness and healing.

Most mainline denominations have a moment in the liturgy for personal confession. If you follow a daily office or read a daily devotion book you may notice a confessional prayer included there too. The Episcopal Book of Common Prayer has this prayer to be read twice a day.

Most merciful God, I confess that I have sinned against you in thought word and deed, by what I have done and by what I have left undone. I have not loved you with my whole heart, I have not loved my neighbors as myself. I am truly sorry and I humbly repent.

It is also not just in Christianity; most religions have formal rituals or make a regular practice of corporate confession at least once a year and is often included in daily prayer or during weekly gatherings. Even twelve step programs include a step of confession. In Alcoholics Anonymous it is step 5:

"Admit to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs. By completing the Fifth Step, we gain God's forgiveness, supervision, and strength. We obtain complete forgiveness..."

Confessing our sins is more than just going through the motions also calls for other acts of repentance such as making restitution if needed and actually changing of one's behavior so as to not re-offend. As humans we are notorious for holding onto old grudges and not forgiving others for past wrongs. There is a measure of vulnerability and willingness to change that comes with truly living a life of confession and forgiveness.

In both readings this morning we have unconfessed sin occurring. For the Psalmist it seems to be a personal sin that is haunting them in their subconscious. But they quickly experience the liberating power of confession. In Isaiah the sins of the people have been buried and denied. The people go on about their spiritual practices believing that they have no sin to confess. They appear to be righteous worshipers of God, as they lift up their hands in worship. But God only sees blood-stained hands of murderers and turns away in disgust.

It reminds me of a scene in the movie The Godfather where the baptism scene is juxtaposed with scenes of a murderous hit is occurring at the behest of the Godfather.

The term Godfather here takes on a dual meaning as a spiritual figure charged with raising a child in the faith and a murderous leader of the mafia.

The sins being pointed out in Isaiah are the sins of the people collectively, not just an individual. Isaiah names the sins as the exploitation of children, widows, and foreigners. Three of the most vulnerable groups of people in society.

True societal repentance, which is what most prophets call for, takes time and a societal revival as the people seek reform or revolution. We are seeing this in Iran right now, as the people are demanding reform from an oppressive religious dictatorship.

We are also seeing it in Canada as first nations people are demanding that residential schools be investigated for thousands of unmarked graves of children buried and hidden by the Catholic church. We are seeing it with ongoing investigations into sex scandals within several religious denominations including the Southern Baptist, Catholic and Mormon religions. We are even seeing it in the growing movement of identifying the historical ties between White Christian Nationalism and White Supremacy in America and Europe. Some people are doubling down claiming it as true Christianity while others are denouncing it demanding repentance from the sins of our fathers and mothers who used religious ideology to defend the dehumanizing treatment of people based on skin color or ethnic identity.

The prophecy of Isaiah 1 still rings true today. He calls all of us to repent of our national sins and be washed clean so that our worship may be pure and holy once again. Hear these words again: *“Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove your evil deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow.”*

As with any confession of sin it begins with our ability to look deeply at the sins of the past and admitting these wrongs. Beyond just confessing, we must correct the systemic ways we have perpetuated these abuses and work to heal the wounds of the

past. All of this takes time and commitment. It will not heal on its own if we cover it up, it must be exposed to the light and seen for what it really is.

We see communities across the nation examining the past and discovering the hidden sins and working together to bring about healing. Such work begins with one or two brave people willing to bring it to light and the community willing to share in this journey of discovery. Just the other day Steve Hartman shared such a story.

More than 100 people gathered outside Mount Vernon's old courthouse on a breezy autumn Sunday to memorialize the deadliest recorded lynching of Black people in state history. The somber ceremony capped off a months-long effort led by 17-year-old Sophie Kloppenburg, a Mount Vernon High School senior, to see a memorial honoring the slain men built on the courthouse lawn. It's been a long time coming.

One 144 years ago, in October 1878, a mob of white Posey County residents unleashed a torrent of racial violence after eight Black men were accused of raping three white women. The accused never received a trial. The mob ultimately shot, stabbed, hung and burned to death seven men.

After months of discussions with city and county leaders, and with the help of teachers, University of Southern Indiana historians and community members, Kloppenburg succeeded in securing the memorial's place at the old courthouse. She spoke to a packed Hovey House Sunday about the lynchings.

"A mob watching African Americans hang has been replaced by a crowd watching us speak and lead," Kloppenburg said as she recounted the events of October 1878.

"We're having difficult conversations, owning up to this horrible history and giving a tangible voice to minorities, past and present."

As we hear at the end of the Isaiah Passage, "come let us reason together." Let us work together to wash the stain of sin from our hands. Not just our own hands, but the hands of our nation also. Let us correct the wrongs of the past so that our worship is a Just worship before a Holy God.