

Repentance and Politics

Nehemiah 8: 1-4a, 5-6, 8-10; Psalms, 19:7-14; Luke 4:14-21
Elected Officials Sunday, January 22, 1989

William H. Willimon
Duke University Chapel, Durham, North Carolina

Introduction

Preaching about politics is a risky business. Frankly, if I had not been pushed into this service, I would not have been here. A number of years ago, Duke University began a tradition of an "Elected Officials Sunday," held biannually on a Sunday soon after our state legislature is installed. Our congressional delegation, governor, Supreme Court, and state elected officials are invited to a service in Duke University Chapel. I inherited the service.

Believing that the ecumenical lectionary is a great resource for preaching and planning worship, I looked at the assigned texts for this Sunday in Epiphany. I was determined to avoid using the service as a platform for asserting my particular political views to a captive audience. The texts suggested a theme of the "eternal word"—Jesus comes to the synagogue at Nazareth and by quoting Scripture, reminds us of a God who exceeds our definitions. A scroll is found in the wall at Jerusalem which asserts the law to God's people. To my mind, these texts, as well as the appointed psalm, suggested instances of the way in which God comes to us from without, judging us, correcting, rebuking us.

For my sermon I asserted that this "external word" was a major gift of the Christian faith to the political process—our goals and means are not the final word. God's ways are not our ways. In short, we sin.

The final sermon was not as rigorously textual as I like my sermons to be. Was I justified in using these texts as mere instances of a biblical dynamic rather than expanding upon their specific content? Lately, I've become as interested in what Scripture *does* to the church as in what it *says* to the church. But in using Scripture as an instance, in a thematic way, have I slipped into petty moralism, filling texts with my own moralistic message rather than allowing a text to speak for itself?

Presbyterian friend, Joe Harvard, when he read the sermon, called me a "closet Calvinist." Joe thinks that Presbyterians have a copyright on the doctrine of original sin.

Well, even if the sermon does not prove that I can preach biblically on politics, at least it is evidence (even in its failure) that a Methodist can sin with as much facility as a Presbyterian.

Repentance and Politics

I confess that, in earlier years, I had mixed feelings about this service. I

inherited Elected Officials Sunday. While I thought it an honor to have the public servants of our state as our guests, I wondered how you felt. Was this just another civic duty on your already full calendars? What was I, as a preacher, to say to politicians? I'm not elected to anything. I pictured you out there, sitting politely, waiting for one more preacher to be done with giving unsolicited advice to politicians.

However, after our last Elected Officials Sunday, that evening, on the News, I was surprised to see some of you being interviewed after the service.

"Governor Martin," asked the TV reporter, "what did the preacher say to you in the sermon today?"

To my utter amazement, the governor said, "Well, his sermon was based on a text from Isaiah. The preacher first noted how our patriotism sometimes becomes idolatrous. . . ." Point by point, the governor went through my entire sermon! I was amazed! I'm accustomed to post-sermon comments like, "Nice talk, preacher," or "Wait 'till I tell President Brodie!"

The governor was really listening! His Presbyterian preacher father would have been proud. And I am proud that many of you come to this service as you come to any other service of worship; *listening for a word*. I pray today that you will hear that word.

The governor did better than President Calvin Coolidge, a man of few words. Coolidge returned home from church one Sunday and was asked by Mrs. Coolidge, "Calvin, what did the preacher speak on today?"

"Sin," replied the taciturn President.

"Well, Calvin, what did he say about sin?" she persisted.

"He said that he was against it," replied Coolidge.

In case a reporter asks, today's sermon is also about sin because today's word is from Nehemiah. A strange, long-forgotten scroll has been found in the walls at Jerusalem during renovation. It is a Torah scroll, a collection of "the law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel." Ezra assembled the whole nation at the Water Gate (stop snickering, please) and at the Water Gate, Ezra stood in a special pulpit and read aloud the whole law. Most had never heard it. It had been lost during years of turmoil and exile. The people heard again those ancient words, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself."

The people wept when they heard the law, when they heard again what God wanted of them. They wept tears of repentance and confession. This is God's chosen people at their best hearing the law of God, listening, aligning their lives accordingly.

You get this religion of repentance in today's psalm:

"The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; . . . who can discern his errors? Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not rule over me" (Psalm 19).

You get this religion of repentance in today's Gospel. Jesus returns to his hometown synagogue and what does he do? What Israel does every Sabbath—he picks up the Torah, God's law, he reads and he interprets. Israel's

faith is a religion of speaking and listening. God speaks. We listen. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach . . . to proclaim . . ." (Luke 4).

Torah, law, represents for biblical people like Israel, like us, the "overagainstness" of God. Judaism, Christianity, are not religion that we find in our hearts, or discover in nature walks in the woods, or stumble upon thinking long thoughts in our study. This religion comes to us as a *word from the outside*—in an ancient scroll found buried in a wall, the sermon of a young, Nazarean prophet back home from college for the weekend. In such moments we are reminded that our God is a real God, not some projection of our collective imagination. Our God stands over against us, outside us, beyond us. Our God's ways are higher than our ways; God's thoughts are deeper than our thoughts. We have to be told what this God wants out of us. Somebody has to speak it to us. Luther called this the *verbum externum*, the "external word."

When this external, over against, divine word came upon the people that day at the Water Gate, they wept. They wept at the gap, the great chasm between our ways and God's ways. We name that chasm sin. Sin is the name for the distance between ourselves and God.

Historian Herbert Butterfield once said that "the Christian notion of sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine in Christianity." That is, while some people may not believe in Jesus or the church, everybody believes in sin. Anybody with even a shred of honesty, even if he or she isn't religious, knows that he or she is a sinner. We mess up, make mistakes, wrong decisions. Everybody knows about sin, says Butterfield.

Butterfield was wrong. Everybody doesn't know about sin. An awareness of sin involves an awareness of the "overagainstness" of God. Sin is something which God must reveal to us because sin is not simply *our* opinions about right and wrong but *our confrontation with the righteousness of God*.

Luther claimed that it was a rare and difficult thing to become a sinner and Karl Barth even claimed that only Christians sin. Only Christians sin? By that he meant that the story of Jesus gives us the resources to look at ourselves honestly, without props or protection. Our greatest gift from the Jews is the amazing ability to look at ourselves as God sees us, measuring our lives on the basis of something more substantial than our own opinions.

John Wesley, who stands over the door to this Chapel (with a pigeon's nest on his head), once said that the bold assertion of human sinfulness is "the first grand distinguishing point between heathenism and Christianity." So we began this service by honest confession of our sin. To come into the presence of the holy God is to be aware of our unholiness. To hear the words of the righteous God is to have our unrighteousness exposed.

I don't have to convince you how essential is this gift of honesty for individuals. You know how shallow (and dangerous) is the person who can't look at his or her life critically. Confrontation with the righteousness of God and responsive, honest confession of our sin is even more essential for groups of individuals or nations. Ezra assembled the nation, read them the scroll of God's law, and the people wept when they heard the gap between our ways and God's way.

When they gave him the Nobel Prize for literature, they asked English novelist William Golding what he had learned in a lifetime of studying human nature. He replied, "I have seen that man produces evil as a bee makes honey." Golding's insight was not original. "I do not understand my own actions," confessed Paul. "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate . . . sin . . . dwells within me . . . I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Romans 7:15, 17, 18).

In the Bible, sin is always more than mere mistakes, slipups. Modern people reduce sin to psychological maladjustment, a problem of inadequate education, immaturity. But when the Bible speaks of sin, it does so in terms of lust, infidelity, prostitution and other sexual imagery in order to convey the personal, deep sense of our sin. Sin is often compared to adultery, the violation of God's fidelity by our infidelity.

So the Bible begins the story of humanity by telling of Adam and Eve, our primal parents who rebelled against God when given the first opportunity to do so. You and I, according to traditional Christian doctrine, never get beyond Adam and Eve. Our sin originates in us. The thoughts of our hearts are, according to Genesis, evil from our youth (8:21). It is more than the mistakes we make, it is the way we are. We are born in rebellion, basing our lives upon what is false rather than what is true, preferring our wills to God's will. Among human beings, says Paul, "there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Original sin unites us with one another and is the gap between us and God.

My point this morning: *The Christian doctrine of original sin is one of the most significant Christian contributions to politics.*

Karl Marx charged that the doctrine of original sin was used by those in power to defend the social and political status quo. If everyone is sinful, why revolt against the status quo since, even after the revolution, all will still be sinners?

The doctrines which have replaced the doctrine of original sin are far from improvements. While conservative social thought sometimes implied that the status of the downtrodden was deserved—they were lazy, heavy drinkers, so they deserved their poverty—the doctrine of original sin never said that. Rather, original sin suggested that privileged classes in no way deserved their status. They were not meritorius, merely lucky. The Bible says *all* have sinned, prince and pauper. All.

Whereas the church taught that sin is who you are rather than merely what you do, in the modern era, the predominate notion became that sin is a matter of sinful actions rather than our basic human disposition. Because the upper classes were less likely to commit such sins as drunkenness, whoring, and idleness, many now argued that they were better people and therefore deserved their superior rank.

Next, Mark and some modern liberals overturned the meritocratic argument: the lower classes are all deserving and the upper classes undeserving. Those who have less are automatically viewed as deprived of their rights, while those who have more are seen as the greedy beneficiaries of ill-gotten gain.

Thus was born modern politics of resentment.

Now, whatever we might have against the traditional doctrine of original sin, we cannot accuse it of perpetuating unjust social arrangements by destroying the dignity of the oppressed. Rather, the classical doctrine of sin told the privileged that their privileges were undeserved, a matter of luck rather than divine right, which carried responsibility for the common good. The doctrine also paved the way for revolution by saying that current social arrangements, the political status quo, were not the result of God's will, but rather the product of human sin and therefore could, and probably should, be changed. At the same time, to believe in the doctrine of original sin is always to maintain a healthy skepticism of the polarized enthusiasms of the Right or the Left, to be highly distrustful of the utopian, crusading spirit, especially when crusaders show little ability for self-criticism. The devastating sins of self-righteousness and holy arrogance infect the Left no less than the Right. Reformers, no less than reactionaries, do not appreciate being told that maybe, just maybe, they may be wrong, that their reforming zeal may be mixed with impure motives.

However, the believer in original sin need not sit back in theological contentment, self-assuredly pointing to the sin of others. As Luther said, we should confess our own sin and throw a mantle of charity over the sins of others. We must guard against the leftist illusion that because structures need changing, prior change of heart is unimportant, and the rightist supposition that because hearts need changing, social and political action is pointless. When our hearts are changed by the love of God, then are we able to apply the doctrine of original *sin to ourselves*. Only then will we be able to make a specifically Christian contribution to the political struggles against structural injustice and oppression.

I once heard a union organizer say that he had a tough time organizing southern textile workers because he couldn't convince these southern Calvinists that (1) all workers are good and always seek the welfare of their fellow workers, and (2) all management is evil and always oppresses the workers. To their credit, I think, these believers refused to project simplistic, dehumanizing images upon complex humanity.

In *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn says, "If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being." Or, as Jesus once said, there's not too much distance between the actual adulterer and all those of us who quite regularly commit "lust of the heart."

"Why should people love the church?" asks poet T.S. Eliot. "Because she tells them of Evil and Sin and other unpleasant facts" which we would love to forget.

The Christian doctrine of original sin, this unpleasant fact in which we get our noses rubbed on Sunday morning, is our gift to the body politic. Is it a cause for pride that our President can boast: "I don't care what the facts are, I will never criticize America. I will never apologize for the United States"?

A few years ago, I wrote a book on sin and evil. Sometimes, what you put in print can come back to haunt you. On page 199 of that book I said,

“Christianity has a stake in keeping a society open with as free a flow of self-criticism as possible. . . .From our point of view, the test of a society would be the extent to which it admits its own . . . systems of denial. In 1983, when the world was shocked by the shooting of an unarmed passenger jet by the Soviets, we noted that Soviet leadership was incapable of admitting mistakes, errors, or wrongdoing. As they see it, to admit wrong . . . would admit that their whole system was wrong This may seem like a childish point of view, and it is. But their denial was more significant. It was the result of a society built upon illusion, an illusion propped up by raw military force. Of course, there is no way to prop up illusion other than by violence.”

On Sunday afternoon, July third, I was visiting a pastor in Bonn, West Germany, watching the evening news, watching them pull the bodies out of the Arabian Gulf. I remembered that paragraph and it was for me, as an American, as if a scroll had been found, after having been long buried in a forgotten wall.