

Repentance In America: In Search Of Sarah's Circle

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Repentance in America has been truncated by an increasingly abstract understanding of sin that cannot be supported biblically. As a consequence, it is difficult to imagine any period in American history that required a fuller experience of the transforming power of repentance than our own. What follows is an attempt to recover the biblical understanding of repentance and an application of that meaning to the mission of the church in our day.

I.

The biblical themes of repentance are foreshadowed in this Ash Wednesday lectionary lesson. For the purpose of the fast is to show that a penitent searching after the will of God can be satisfied by nothing less than personal commitment to ministries of compassion and justice:

Cry with all your might, spare not, lift up your voice like a trumpet, and declare to my people their transgression and to the house of Jacob their sins.

They seek me daily, and desire to know my ways; like a nation that does righteousness and does not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask me what judgments are righteous, they wish to draw near to God. "Why do we fast, and thou seest it not? We mortify our flesh, and thou takest no knowledge of it?"

Behold, in the day of your fast you pursue your own business and urge on all your workers. Behold you fast to quarrel and fight and lay about yourselves with wicked heels.

Fasting like yours is no fasting to make your voice to be heard on high. Would such be the fast that I would take pleasure in, a day when a man mortifies his flesh, bows down his head like a rush, spreads sackcloth and ashes under him? Do you call this a fast, a day in which Yahweh takes pleasure?

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the enslaved go free, that you break every yoke. Does it not mean sharing your bread with the hungry, and bringing the homeless poor into your house, when you see someone naked, to cover him, and not to withdraw yourself from your own flesh?

Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing will

spring up at once, your salvation goes before you, and the glory of Yahweh is your rear guard. Then you shall call, and Yahweh answers, you cry, and he says, Here I am. If you take away from the midst of you oppression, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, and bestow your bread on the hungry, and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light gleam in the darkness, and your gloom be as the clear day. Yahweh will guide you continually, and satisfy your desire in the thirsty land. And he will make your bones young again, you shall be like a spring whose waters fail not. Ancient ruins shall be rebuilt by you, you raise up the foundations of many generations, you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of what was torn down to dwell in.

Isaiah 58:1-12 (Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*
Old Testament Library Series)

Like its counterparts in Old Testament prophecy—such as that of Amos who despises empty religious ritual, equating the search for God with the search for good, for justice, and compassion—this passage suggests that “sin” is our refusal to relate to God and the human community with love that is responsible and compassionate. It is to “hide ourselves from our own flesh,” to refuse our involvement in the human community.

Postures of remorse and empty expressions of contrition that do not arise from any change of heart or promise new behavior bear no resemblance to the fast God chooses or the repentance to which Jesus calls us in the Gospel lesson for the first Sunday of Lent:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, “the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.”

Mark 1:14-15

Jesus expanded the Old Testament concept of repentance that called for changed behavior into the more fundamental call for a change of heart and mind that transforms our person as well as our behavior. That new dimension of repentance is revealed because it is Jesus, the embodiment of God’s inbreaking love, who calls us to repentance. *It is in the context of God’s love that the nature of repentance is understood. Repentance occurs when we are overwhelmed by the love of God which is always a gift to us.* It is not an act one makes in fear. The limited success of the fiery tent preachers confirms that true repentance occurs when we see as if for the first time who we can be and what the world is really like. Repentance calls us toward a new vision of reality and a new vision of what time it really is. It necessarily creates a new system of values and priorities.

This transformation of values and priorities is suggested in the parable of the person plowing the field who goes and sells everything to purchase the treasure he discovered there. That radical transformation in priorities and goals suggests the difficulty in defining repentance by the static qualities of remorse or a guilty conscience. Repentance, as Jesus defined it, has an antiphonal qual-

ity in which the acknowledgment of our sin points beyond itself creating a new vision, the treasure in the field, in which we can invest our lives. Because the acknowledgment of sin cannot be separated from the new vision it creates, repentance and faith are poles of the same experience. *Repentance is an active, future oriented experience. It is the call to mission.* Obviously such an experience must occur in our own experience, but its emphasis is corporate. The brevity and precision of Mark's gospel suggest that it is not merely coincidental that the call to the disciples immediately follows this call to "repent and believe." To hear the call to repentance is to find ourselves claimed by the vision of the community of faith.

As the central theme in the preaching and ministry of Jesus, repentance becomes the ordering theme in the life of the Church describing a readiness to allow our values to be shaped and reshaped by the new vision of the gospel of God. To speak of repentance in America requires that we discern its effectiveness in the life of the church. Its diminished role in worship is suggestive of our dilemma.

II.

Worship is a dramatic statement of our relation to God and our world. We are called to worship by the creative and redeeming love of God before which we can only confess whom we have become; we hear again who we are by the saving grace of God; we respond in commitment and prayer to the sanctifying instruction of God's Word; and we depart with the renewal of God's blessing. Throughout this sequence we can trace the transforming dynamic of repentance as we confess, hear of the new redemptive reality, and inform and recommit our lives to this vision. Particularly suggestive is the role of the corporate prayer of confession. It is that point in the liturgy at which tradition suggests we are to confess our predisposition to sin and our continuing need for repentance.

With reference to the image of the church as the Body of Christ, I have come to understand this prayer analogically as the central nervous system. For it is the sensitive indicator of our state of being. Here is not only the opportunity to declare who we are, but also whom we want to become. It is particularly alarming to realize that the corporate prayer of confession is often absent or made ineffective by vague and abstract language lacking any specific relation to the actual life of the congregation in the world. Most often this prayer reflects the static definition of repentance as remorse as if God were convinced by "sack cloth and ashes" prayers that require nothing of us. I am haunted by the following verses from Amos, for we are the priests who preside at the feasts and order the solemn assemblies:

I hate, I despise your fasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon.
Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen.

But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream.

Amos 5:21-24

The confessional section of the liturgy affords the possibility for more intentionally phrased prayers of confession that reflect the dynamic nature of repentance. In such prayers the confession of our sinfulness arises specifically from our experience and points beyond itself to call forth those commitments and new values that testify to our change of heart and mind.

The significance of attention to confession that is more specific and realistic lies in the fact that it may help us recover an understanding of the power of sin as that estrangement or separation we experience from God and one another. As Karl Menninger suggests in *Whatever Became of Sin*, we have made sin increasingly remote from our experience. His analysis names this distancing of ourselves from responsibility for the consequences of sin as "collective irresponsibility." This is simply a new and helpful title for familiar experiences. "Collective irresponsibility" is apparent in the feeling that we have no responsibility for what is primarily another's decision. (We did not write the legislation that fails to protect migrant workers.) "Collective irresponsibility" rears its head in the sloughing off of guilt that can be shared and therefore never reach that "critical mass" that calls forth a response. (Who would take the blame for Vietnam now? Why should the slavery practiced by great grandparents implicate us?) Perhaps most frightening is the relatively recent emergence of the collective irresponsibility of the corporation which has no face or name, and, in the case of multinational corporations, no single government to whom it is accountable. (Who tells Nestles and its counterparts what to do in their marketing ethics?)

The frightening fact of this phenomenon of sin as abstraction is that it works like dominoes. When sin become abstract, repentance is necessarily vague, and the mission it requires of the Church will be ambiguous. Repentance points beyond itself to where we want to go and be in order to help give focus to that vision Jesus embodied in his ministry and preaching.

Who would contest the truth in these familiar lines from *The Book of Common Worship*: "We have offended against (God's) holy laws. We have left undone those things we ought to have done, and we have done those things we ought not to have done. . . ." (p. 21)? But these sentences do not call us to face up to the particularity of our sin in its corporate dimensions; and therefore, they do not point toward the new values and new ways of being that such specificity would require. It is time to be concerned for more convicting clarity than "poetry." The following excerpts from two confessional prayers suggest my meaning though the difficulty of its appropriate expression is also obvious:

. . . Lord, you know the careful limits of our vision, the convenience of our commitments, the cautious sophistication of our praise. We love the pretense of power too much to serve, of security too much to dare to share your vision, of comfort too much to stand with the human community into which you call us. . .

. . . We no longer look for One who transforms the predictable into new possibilities. We have made our peace with graft and injustice, but you

came to judge the world with righteousness. We've become calloused to televised starvation and statistical poverty, but you came to preach good news to the poor. . . .

While I am not suggesting these sentences merit imitation, I do believe they are more convicting than the earlier familiar prayer because they arise more directly from our corporate experience and point with greater clarity toward the transformed values and life-styles to which we commit ourselves.

III.

I am suggesting that repentance in America will require that we move away from static prayers of remorse and the defensive postures of our guilty conscience. We must accept for ourselves and require of our neighbors an acknowledgment of our participation in and responsibility for sin as it separates us from loving and responsible relationships with God and the entire human community. *The clarity of our prayers of repentance enable the clarity of our sense of mission.*

Rarely have the imperatives of that mission for Christians in America been clearer than now. At every level the human community is as a fabric so frayed that it cannot be patched any longer and must be rewoven. If the pattern and quality of that tapestry are to reveal the design of the Gospel's vision, then the Christian community must be clear about its participation in the sin that precipitated this crisis and the new values and ways of being that repentance suggests.

Repentance in contemporary America arises from the reality of the ancient and abiding sin cited by the Ash Wednesday lesson from Isaiah, "we have hidden from our own flesh." We have stood apart from the human community though we profess the Lordship of Jesus who identified himself with the "least" of humankind and defined our neighbor by the excruciatingly convicting story of "the good Samaritan."

Essentially, repentance in America must be characterized by the Church's acknowledgment of its cultural captivity to American values and priorities. The sin of that cultural captivity and the repentance it envisions is imaginatively and dynamically portrayed by the feminist, Carole Etzler, in her song, "We Are Dancing Sarah's Circle" (on her album, *Sometimes I Wish*, recorded by Sisters Unlimited). Her song is a perceptive comment on the church's uncritical acceptance of American values. In it she suggests the rejection of the uncomfortable parallels between climbing Jacob's patriarchal ladder and the exploitative hierarchy of the infamous, American corporate ladder. In exchange she shares the vision of Sarah's circle which symbolizes the values of mutually supportive human relationships.

The peculiar and brief history of American culture, in the context of global development, supports Carole's critique suggesting that the fundamental value of which we must repent is that of our inordinately proud individualism. Characterized by a now waning innocence, it was formerly sustained by the pretense that our accomplishments were at the expense of no one or thing. It now is

rationalized by the abstraction of our collective irresponsibility. Our value system must undergo the radical transformation from ladder to circle as we repent from seeking the most we can have for ourselves in order to discover how we can live together more economically by sharing what we have. We must repent the pretense of our singular importance among the world's peoples and embrace as our mission the vision of "Sarah's circle," the human community as a global village.

The dramatic and provocative differences suggested in this image of the circle rather than the ladder point to the radical nature of the transformation in values required of us. The ladder suggests life lived in spite of, over against, in competition with, one another and often at the expense of the created order. The circle suggests the interdependence and mutuality of life lived in a global community where we learn to share power, talents, resources, and support in behalf of one another and with respect for the resources of the earth and universe.

The global constituency and participatory design of the Mission Consultation held in Montreal February, 1978, was based on the same presuppositions as those of Sarah's circle. Participants gathered to discern barriers to be overcome and the most critical needs to be met for the one mission of Christ's church. Strategies were then focused on the particular resources of the host communion, but there were implicit commitments for the others present whose participation had deepened the reality of and their commitment to our interdependence in the world. The insights of that Consultation are particularly helpful in citing the barriers to the creation of the global community. The following excerpts from the "Justice" section of the "Claims Paper" illustrate more specifically what repentance requires of us who will repent, step off the ladder, and reach out to create a global circle:

That even one person created in God's image should perish from hunger, live in substandard housing, lack medical care, be denied the right to education and meaningful employment, or suffer from the tyranny of political, social, or economic oppression is an affront both to divine love and to human dignity.

Our church is part of the affluent society of a powerful nation. We have material wealth and hold access to the centers of influence and power in industry, government, business, and education, while the vast majority of humankind lives at a mere subsistence level. . . . Surely the great disparity and imbalance between the rich and the poor nations of the world, and between the affluent and impoverished sectors within each country call for urgent and radical solutions.

Because of ambiguity in understanding the Paper's use of "acquiescence" as it relates to our participation in the capitalistic system, the following note was attached by the General Assembly.

We do, however, affirm that uncritical acceptance of capitalism or any other system when it is exploitative and oppressive is sinful.

The "Claims Paper" then goes on to say:

We believe Christ calls us to dissent from our present lifestyles and to make a radical break from the patterns of over-indulgence, consumerism, and reckless waste.

Christ calls us to solidarity with the poor and powerless, not only through altering our lifestyle, but also by standing with them in their entitlement to justice and liberation.

Christ calls us to share our resources, influence and power for the sake of others.

Christ calls us to help create the political will for a new international economic order [that] fosters equitable distribution of the good bounty of God's creation among all people.

Christ calls us to redress the injustice we have done within [the Church] to women, to youth, to ethnic minorities, including Blacks, Spanish speaking people, native Americans, Asians and others.

The significant realization that seems unavoidable in reading those calls to repentance lies in the fact that they are, as Roger Shinn suggests, "forced options." Human rights, economics, energy, food, and ecology require our concerted response. They are not manifestations of abstract sin, nor may they be ignored by the machinations of collective irresponsibility; they require our collective responsibility.

If repentance in our worship services is genuine and concrete, the specifics of the mission of the church will emerge as we confess our sin and turn in obedience toward the future. For repentance is a prerequisite for mission, and mission is an obedient, thankful response to the grace of God.