

Quieting the Echoes of Sin

Nehemiah 1: 1-11; Hebrews 4: 14-16

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In worship, we regularly confess to God that:

We have not loved with our whole heart.
We have failed to be an obedient church.
We have not done God's will,
 we have broken God's law,
 we have rebelled against God's love.
We have not loved our neighbors,
 and we have refused to hear the cry of the needy.
Forgive us, we pray.¹

Growing up, I asked for forgiveness, a lot. Perhaps I was just like any child, but from my vantage point, it seemed I was *always* saying, *I'm sorry*.

I'm sorry, Dad, for leaving your tools out in the yard last night
 when it rained.
I'm sorry, Mom, for using your good sewing scissors to cut my
 cardboard box.
I'm sorry, Susan, for hiding under your bed and then scaring you.

You see, I hid under my older sister's bed while she was in the bathroom. I had no idea what I was going to do there; I just knew that it was bedtime and that she would return soon. She came in and sat down on the bed right above me. There, inches away, were her ankles; being an eight-year-old, I reached out and at once grabbed both of them. She went flying out of the room screaming! "Wow, now that was something," I thought as I lay there. When I finally realized that I should probably not be discovered at the scene of crime, I crawled out from under the bed only to receive a generous boost from my father. Oh, there were several reasons to be sorry!

I'm sorry was a constant refrain of my childhood. During my teenage years, the frequency of my apologies accelerated. When I began driving, for instance, I suddenly had many more opportunities to hang my head and utter, *I'm sorry*. On one such occasion of "vehicular repentance," I distinctly remember my mother replying to my apology with frustration: "David, you can't just say you're sorry and expect it to make everything all right!"

You can't just say you're sorry. This statement gave me so much pause that I remember it today. And today, as a pastor, I wonder if my mother was right. Of course she made this statement out of sheer frustration with her son who once again had made a mistake. She probably also said this because of the casual way in which I made my apology—you know, the teenager's use of *sorry* to get the parent to stop focusing on the transgression. Nevertheless, I wonder if her statement—*You can't*

just say you're sorry and expect it to make everything all right—is true.

In worship we confess that we have not loved, been obedient, or done God's will. In most Presbyterian churches, worship is structured to give us a chance to confess our sins, to ask for God's mercy, to receive God's assurance of pardon, and to praise God for this grace. But do these acts of confession and pardon make everything all right? Does the pardon we receive in worship mean that all aspects of our sins are wiped clean? When we look to Nehemiah, I believe we find that the answer is yes and no.

Nehemiah hears of the great trouble and shame the survivors of the siege of Jerusalem are experiencing and of the destruction of the wall and burning of Jerusalem's gates. The Israelites who escaped captivity were left with only desolation. The conquering of Israel was comprehensive. All that remained of the once great wall of Jerusalem was a pile of rubble, and the massive gates to the holy city had been destroyed by fire. The Israelites who were not forced into exile were left with only the taste of their shame.

The piles of broken stone and the ash from the gates are a visible parallel to the people's breach of the covenant with Yahweh. Nehemiah only has to hear that the wall has been broken down and the gates destroyed by fire to comprehend the consequences of his and Israel's sin. The word about Jerusalem creates a conviction of heart in Nehemiah. The tragic and overwhelming news brings Nehemiah to his knees in confession, for confession is the only response he can make. Nehemiah is in full mourning. For days, Nehemiah sits and weeps. He fasts and prays, day and night, before God, "confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Both I and my family have sinned" (1:6-7). In facing the consequences of sin, Nehemiah engages in the most pious liturgical act of repentance. He prostrates himself before God, grieves what has happened, and fasts and prays.

This liturgical act of repentance is the only thing that keeps our sins from echoing through our world. Repentance is the only thing a teenager can do when he has done wrong. Confession is the only thing the Israelites can do when they are faced with the effects of their unfaithfulness. When our sins are made known to us, our first act should be one of repentance.

Several years ago, seventeen South African leaders held candles and olive branches; they said prayers and hugged each other, offering strength for the task ahead. These national leaders were the seventeen members of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission who had come together to be blessed in St. George's Cathedral and to pledge themselves for, in their words, "the purpose of healing our nation."² President Nelson Mandela promised, "Justice would be done for the victims."³ Yet this justice meant that many of the guilty would go free, for the policy of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is that if the guilty come forward (many of whom were still serving in the government) and divulge all they know about the cruelty that took place under apartheid, they may not be held accountable. It is the truth with no consequences; those who are guilty can say they are sorry and have everything made new.

In 1983, Marius Schoon, a leader of the African National Congress, or ANC, (the ANC at that time was the primary voice against apartheid) was living in Angola because the death threats against him had become too intense. There, at home, Mr. Schoon received a package in the mail. It was a bomb—a bomb meant for him.

Tragically, in a scorching flash, the bomb killed his wife and six-year-old daughter. Mr. Schoon, today living in his homeland of South Africa with the walls of apartheid torn down, heard in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission every detail about the planning and execution of the mail bomb from the lips of the one who did it. After this confession, the bomber walked freely out of the room and resumed his life. Does finding out who and why simply make everything all right? Mr. Schoon doesn't think so. He says that if the perpetrators are not put behind bars then he is left only with anger and betrayal. Schoon states, "I'm not convinced the commission will bring about reconciliation for those who suffered."⁴ In this case, Mr. Schoon would agree with my mother's statement: *You can't just say you're sorry and expect it to make everything all right.*

Our sins are not separate from the community in which we live. Our sins have an impact on those around us. They echo through our community; they reverberate through us with relentless perseverance. When we lie, we erode the confidence of the community to know what the truth is. When we make wrongful use of the Lord's name, we deteriorate everyone's hope in the One God. When we steal, when we commit adultery, when we covet, when we break any of the Ten Commandments, our sinful acts have lasting effects upon the community, effects that usually last long after the declaration of pardon. On this side of heaven, our sins may be forgiven, but they echo and echo and echo throughout the community.

A member of my former congregation had been in an abusive marriage for nearly a decade. She had experienced everything from harsh verbal abuse to overwhelming neglect. Finally, with great courage, Valerie told her husband, "Enough is enough. I will take this no more." And with this conviction, she left with her two sons. Her action was quite sobering for Jim, her husband. In fact, it was so sobering, he suggested they seek pastoral counseling. After several meetings, they started to scratch the surface of his abusive and neglectful nature. Then Jim proclaimed that he had been "born again." Through this conversion, he now saw his mistakes. He was repentant. He saw the truth of his life and asked Valerie to forgive him; he experienced true remorse for his actions. Was my mother's statement true? Does an abusive husband's apology wipe clean the twelve years of neglect and abuse? Does the disclosure of information at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission bring healing and wholeness to those who have suffered?

If we look at the world around us, I believe we have to say *no*. Mr. Schoon and my friend Valerie cannot forget what has happened simply because the perpetrators have told the truth or repented. The sins of the past, even though forgiven, echo with their consequences in the community today. Think about it in your own life. Perhaps you are tormented by a sin you committed that is still present in your family. Or perhaps you still feel the effects of someone else's sin. The effect of our sin only *begins* at the time of the transgression. We do not cause harm solely at the moment of sin. At the moment of sin, we set in motion a process of decay that permeates the community. For the Israelites, it was not just the terrible siege, but also the exile, the refugees left behind, and the loss of the holy city of Jerusalem. *You can't just say you're sorry.*

If we look at the world around us, we know this is a true statement. *You can't just say you're sorry.* As Christians, however, we have to respond to this statement in another way as well. You *can* just say you're sorry and have it make everything

all right. Yes, our repentance *does* bring healing and wholeness to those who have suffered. No, the declaration of pardon in our worship service is *not* just something we say; it is our declaration that we are again servants of God. It is one of the primary ways God transforms this sin-sick world through us.

The blue flash was the first thing the three technicians noticed when they poured uranium oxide solution into a precipitation tank at Tokaimura. Soon they began to experience waves of nausea and some difficulty in breathing. They had accidentally dumped in six times as much fissile uranium as they had meant to, triggering a runaway chain reaction. The International Atomic Energy Agency has classified the Tokaimura accident—the worst in Japanese history—as a level four on its seven—point scale. In the newspaper just three days after the accident, a photograph from Tokaimura captivated me. In the photograph, the head of the plant had prostrated himself before a crowded room of local residents. Can you imagine such a scene in the United States, someone taking such demonstrative responsibility for his or her actions days after such an accident? The photograph captivated me because it visibly demonstrated the beginning of reconciliation: the head of the plant down on his hands and knees, his head just a few inches from the floor in humble contrition. When we are servants of God, repentance is our first act when we are confronted by our sin. Yet repentance is not the end of reconciliation; it is only the beginning.

After Nehemiah confesses and receives God's pardon, his work has just begun. The wall is still a pile of rubble, and the ash still swirls in the wind when he finishes confessing. Therefore, Nehemiah, a servant of God, begins to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. The wall that was destroyed because of his and Israel's sin is now to be rebuilt by the whole community. And it would take the whole community: a priest to consecrate the new gates and towers; goldsmiths, perfumers, merchants, rulers, and their daughters to repair the wall; and families to stand in the breaches so that their enemies would not stop their work.

What needs to be rebuilt in your life? Are there walls of trust that have been eroded away, or even torn down, walls that need your work rebuilding? Have you said things or done things that were unfaithful? Are there relationships that are cracked or even breached by your actions or inactions? There are. There are for all of us, because we, like the Israelites, are unfaithful.

My mother was right. She was right to remind me that *you can't just say you're sorry and expect it to make everything all right*. She knew there was more to it than that. We know it, too; we know that confession is only the beginning of reconciliation. When we confess, our words of confession bring mercy and grace to us; in Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. And when we are forgiven, we can, as servants of God, commit ourselves with God's help and all diligence to rebuild whatever has been torn apart and burned by our sin, silencing the echoes of sin in the world with our service.

Notes

¹ The Theology and Worship Ministry Unit, *Book of Common Worship*, (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 89.

² "Tell All, Maybe," *The Economist*, 17 February 1996, 38.

³ "Tell All, Maybe," 38.

⁴ "Tell All, Maybe," 38.