

Preaching Repentance in a Time of War

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Dear God, we are in a mess. By “we” I mean Christians in America. I believe we are in a mess because as Christians in America, we are more American than Christian. That we are more American than Christian was clearly indicated by the Christian response to September 11, 2001. Christians assumed that the “we” in “we are at war” was the Christian “we.” I will suggest that our identification of the Christian “we” with the American “we” should, at the very least, give Christians pause. Put even more forcefully, as a people called to repentance, we must discern what repentance might mean if we are to distinguish the Christian “we” from the American “we.” I do not pretend that such a discernment is a simple matter.

Some may think that Americans losing confidence in the war in Iraq is a sign that we may be ready to rethink our response to September 11, 2001. Americans are finally coming to our senses. I am not sure how to read the American disease with the war, but I fear that the unwillingness to support the war has more to do with the inability to “win” than with any profound moral reassessment of the presuppositions that seemed to legitimize the war in the first place.

After all, most Americans, Christian or non-Christian, were enthusiastic about the war in its early stages. Even if there were no weapons of mass destruction, the war was assumed to be justified because it was part of the “War on Terrorism.” That no clear relation between Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden could be established was thought by most to be an insignificant detail. Perhaps even more troubling than the general American approval of the war was the assumption that a war on terrorism made sense or could be justified.

Lent is an appropriate time to try to fathom how we got in the mess we are in. After all, Lent is the time the church has set aside for the examination of conscience in the hope that we might identify and repent of our sins. Yet it is by no means clear what it might mean to preach repentance at this time in our country. Who is the “we” that is to do the repenting? Do we really expect “the nation” to be capable of repentance? What sin can be named from which we should repent? How can a “prophetic call to repent” avoid the sin of self-righteousness?

Moreover, the political challenge for the preacher who would preach on repentance in a time of war, even during Lent, is not easily negotiated. How could anyone preach about the war in Iraq without seeming to “take a side” politically? Even those American politicians who are critics of the war are required to make clear that, though they are critical of the war, they are unwavering in support of our soldiers who are doing their duty. Try suggesting in a sermon that Christians who find themselves in the military may not have adequately examined their consciences as Christians, and you will discover that there are very definite limits to preaching repentance.

Please note I am not suggesting that those in the military are implicated in sin in a manner that those who are not in the military are not. Most Christians in the military have never had it suggested to them that Christians have or should have a problem with war. Yet most Christians, at least most American Christians, do not believe that Chris-

tians have a problem with war. They may well think war is “not a good thing,” but they also believe that sometimes war is necessary. It simply does not occur to them that their assumption that war is not a problem for Christians may be an indication that sin has us under possession. Indeed that way of putting the matter is profoundly offensive to most American Christians who sinfully think that sin is something we do rather than a power that possesses us.

I suspect these kinds of challenges are why most of the sermons on repentance during Lent concentrate on “personal” confession of sin and repentance. We, and by “we” I mean most American Christians, are simply incapable of confessing sin as a community. As a result, our understanding of sin tends to be “moralistic.” We think of sin as some particular “bad habit” that, if we try hard enough, we can break. We even believe our guilt can be trusted to indicate what our sins may be, thus failing to recognize that our guilt too often is but the form our unfailing narcissism takes.

I certainly do not want to deny the significance of individual self-examination or repentance. I do, however, have deep reservations regarding whether we are even capable of knowing on our own what our sins may be. That we think repentance is primarily about “my sin” makes it extremely difficult to make sense of what it might mean to confess our sin as a people. Yet interestingly enough, most of the scripture we read during Lent directs our attention not to “my” sins, but to *our* sins. The church can hardly expect a nation to be able to confess its sin as a nation unless the church is capable of expressing our common sin as a church. And I do not think that we can learn to preach repentance as a church without the practice of penance.

I am a communicant of the Church of the Holy Family (Episcopal) in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. It is typical for us to use the Penitential Order to begin the Liturgy during Advent and Lent. After the commencement of the “war against terrorism,” however, all Liturgies, except those during Christmas and Easter at the Church of the Holy Family begin with the Penitential Rite. By beginning our worship in this way, I believe we are learning what it might mean to repent as a people during the time of war.

The use of the Penitential Rite to begin the liturgies at Holy Family after September 11, 2001 was accompanied by an explanatory paragraph in our bulletin. The paragraph reads: “*The Penitential Order*: During these Sundays after Pentecost while the United States and its allies are at war in Iraq and Afghanistan, we begin our celebrations of the Holy Eucharist with the Penitential Order, mindful for repentance and praying for the life of the world.” This paragraph makes it unmistakably clear that our penitential practice is directly related to living in a country at war.

The phrasing of the paragraph is extremely important. For example, when we first began the practice of beginning our liturgies with the Penitential Rite, the paragraph in the bulletin began this way: “During the time when we are at war in Iraq and Afghanistan, we begin our celebrations of the Holy Eucharist with the Penitential Order, mindful for repentance and praying for the life of the world.” Several members of the church, however, objected to that way of putting the matter because the “we” suggested that the church and America were the same. They did not deny that the identification of American “we” and the Christian “we” may be descriptively accurate, but they did not want the description to become a normative presumption. They worried that the grammar of the “we” in the phrase “we are at war” might suggest that the church cannot be distinguished from the nation.

This may well seem a small matter, but I think it a crucial distinction if we are to sustain the penitential discipline of the church. For the church is able to repent because the church is able to recognize sin in a manner that the American “we” cannot. The current wording in the bulletin does not deny that Christians in America are implicated in the war, but the wording, “the United States and its allies are at war,” is an acknowledgment that Christians, if we are to be a witness against ourselves, must be a people who are able to be distinguished from America. It is the United States and its allies who are at war, not the church or Christians.

Yet the wording also makes clear that, as Christians in America, we cannot divorce ourselves from America. That America is at war no doubt reflects our failure as Christians to help others understand why we have a problem with war. Because we have been given the gift of God’s peace, the same peace we share with one another before we receive the body and blood of Christ, we know we are called to be an alternative to the world’s presumption that there is no alternative to war. So the wording of the announcement in the bulletin is important to enable us as Christians to name our sins as well as be of service to the society in which we find ourselves.

Equally important is the Penitential Order itself. The Order begins by our being addressed by the Celebrant in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are confronted with the Decalogue by being directed to “Hear the commandments of God to his people: I am the Lord your God who brought you out of bondage. You shall have no other gods but me.” We are instructed to respond, “Amen. Lord, have mercy.” We are, therefore, not addressed as individuals, but as a people who must confess our sins as a people.

After the great commandment is read, we are then invited to confess our sins before God and our neighbor using this prayer:

Most merciful God,
We confess that we have sinned against you
In thought, word, and deed,
By what we have done,
And by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
Have mercy on us and forgive us;
that we may delight in your will,
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.

The grammar of the confession therefore makes it impossible for us to try to take possession of our sins as though our sins do not implicate the whole body. That is why the Celebrant declares us forgiven saying: “Almighty God have mercy on you, forgive you all your sins through our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen you in all goodness, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life.” Our confession of sin is a confession of a people, and the forgiveness offered is the forgiveness of a people.

By having our sins identified by the Decalogue, we undergo training to name our

sins in the hope we might begin to see, for example, a connection between learning not to lie, not taking God's name in vain, and our willingness to kill. For if the church does not only provide an alternative to war, but is an alternative to war, the church must help those who worship God to discover that our violence lies in our failure to live the truth that comes through the body and blood of Christ.

But how does this help us preach repentance in time of war? At the very least it invites those obligated to preach the Word of God to make connections otherwise impossible. Killing in war may be an indication of the power sin has over our lives, but to "preach against war," to preach against the war in Iraq, can be an empty gesture. "Prophetic preaching" may win plaudits for the preacher for being courageous, but it does little to help us locate what it might mean to repent. We must begin by asking: what are the practices that have led the church in America to forget that Christians have or should have a problem with war?

For the reason Christians have a problem with war draws on our most fundamental action; that is, through the Eucharist we have been "accepted as living members of Jesus Christ" and thus sent into the world in peace. Word and sacrament cannot be separated lest we be tempted to forget that the church is God's alternative to war. This is what makes it possible to preach repentance in a manner that avoids the impression that one is choosing sides in the current arena of American politics. But this also means preaching repentance in a time of war is possible only if the preaching prior to the time of war has been determined by the "politics of God."

The name of the "politics of God" is church. Preaching is a gift given to the church to aid those who worship God in making the connections necessary to see the world truthfully. Thus my claim is that the first task of the church is not to make the world more just, but to make the world the world. For the world cannot know it is the world unless a people exist who are called from the world to be an alternative to the world. How can the world know there is an alternative to war unless a people exist who, shaped by the Word of God, know they are not to kill—even in war?

I am well aware that to preach repentance for the Christian support of war seems a daunting task, given the situation of mainline Protestant churches in America. Those who make up the mainline churches of America do not believe that the church is an alternative to war. They do not believe the church is an alternative to war because they have never heard sermons that suggest that the church is an alternative to war. Rather, most of the sermons they hear offer little more than "insights" into the human condition. Judgment and repentance are left to the fundamentalists who are happily despised because they are judgmental. The problem with the fundamentalists, however, is not that they are judgmental or that they call for repentance, but rather that what they assume to be under judgment reflects presumptions of the American well-off middle class rather than a people determined by the Decalogue.

So if we are to preach repentance during a time of war, we must, as those who preach, begin by repenting of how we have failed to preach truthfully. Let us say to our congregations that we feared their reactions if we had preached that Christians have a problem with war. But we now repent of our cowardice, and at the very least, that means we must learn the difference that being Christian, even in America, makes. Preach that, and I promise you will have a very memorable Lent.