

Preaching Repentance at the Start of a New Millennium

Barbara Brown Taylor
Piedmont College, Demorest, Georgia

On New Year's Eve 999, Saint Peter's basilica in Rome was filled with worshipers expecting the end of the world. Many of them had given away all they owned to the poor, while others had spent weeks in prayer and penance for their sins. Some dressed in sackcloth and ashes, which stuck to the skin they had bloodied through various mortifications of the flesh. Up at the altar, Pope Sylvester II celebrated the last mass of the old millennium. When he finished, he pronounced the final blessing on the people and the great bell began to toll. According to ancient chronicle, some present died of fright, while others lay face down on the floor with their arms spread in imitation of Christ on the cross.¹ When the clock struck twelve and time did not end, the stunned crowd gradually trickled home—or, for those who had given away their homes—to whatever shelter they could find in a world that had been inexplicably spared by God.

A thousand years later we have survived the turn of another millennium, only the sackcloth and ashes people were in the minority this time. More anxiety surrounded the crashing of computers than the confession of sins. Those who entered the new year scouring their souls were outnumbered by those wrestling corks from champagne bottles, and the only repentance most people did was to wish on New Year's Day that they had not drunk so much the night before. In the words of the eminent physician Karl Menninger, whatever became of sin?

In the rural south where I live, sin and repentance are still very lively concepts. On my way to work each morning, I pass three hand-painted signs nailed to pine trees by the road ("Repent. Jesus is coming") and eight church marquees with changing messages ("Exchange your sins for the Son inside"). On Saturdays, a local evangelist stands in the town square, brandishing his white New Testament at passing motorists. If you have any doubt about what sin is, he will tell you. Believing in evolution is sin. Letting women lead is sin. Defending homosexuals is sin.

Perhaps because he and his kind are so vocal about sin and repentance, the words get less of a workout at mainline churches around town. Walk into any of them on Sunday morning and you are more likely to hear about God's grace and forgiveness. Eager to provide an alternative to fire-and-brimstone preaching, the pastors of these congregations proclaim a more moderate gospel. Of course we all fall short of the glory of God. That goes without saying. The church is not a private club for the righteous but a hospice for the sick and wounded. Since none of us is whole, who will cast the first stone?

In other parts of the country, sin and repentance seem to have disappeared from church for other reasons. The problem is not so much that the words have been kidnapped by a hostile gang, who have used them so roughly that their meaning has been bruised. Instead, the problem is that they sound like words from another age, as outdated to many ears as "beseech" and "vouchsafe." Some sins, such as murder and theft, are better described as crimes while others, such as drunkenness and suicide, are

more easily understood as pathology. To call them all “sins” seems no more nuanced than to call them all “wrong.” Haven’t we come farther than that? With all that we have learned about biochemistry, mental illness, and early childhood development, can’t we use language more enlightened than “sin” and “repentance”?

There is also the problem of the evolution of sins. Sabbath-breaking and image-making were once punishable by death. Nowadays few people think twice about mowing the lawn on Sunday or printing a picture of the crucified Christ on a polyester tee shirt. Usury and gluttony have ceased to be serious sins, along with swearing and divorce. What mainline church could afford to ban bankers, big eaters, or divorcées from leadership roles? Add to this the different codes of conduct encountered by Christians who may change denominations—moving from a tradition in which drinking alcohol is considered sinful, for instance, to one in which alcohol is used in worship—and the slope becomes exceedingly slippery. In many congregations, the only sins openly denounced from the pulpit are low attendance, poor stewardship, and failure to sign up for the Sunday school rota.

President Clinton’s impeachment trial provided many otherwise reluctant preachers with an opportunity to focus on more salacious sins, but at least some of them may have felt less than heroic when they were through. What makes other people’s sins so delicious—and especially their sexual sins—is that they take the heat off the rest of us. While we are joined in exposing someone else’s sin, we are freed from confessing our own. If the sin is blatant enough, then we are all able to agree on something for once, and if the sinner is the president of the United States, then our moral superiority reaches new heights. In this one respect at least, we may imagine ourselves better than the leader of our nation.

Among those who did not pick up stones last year were preachers with some published or unpublished sins of their own. They kept their mouths shut because they did not want to be hypocrites, but their silence may be as telling as any sermon. Do our own sins disqualify us from speaking of sin? Are we only allowed to reprove the sins that we ourselves have not committed? More to the point, what possible sense can God’s grace make apart from the deadly knowledge of sin?

While fundamentalism, secularism, and pluralism can all be blamed for our reluctance to speak of sin, the bottom line is that the word does not seem to “work” anymore. Say it out loud and the room is suddenly hung with shame and guilt, neither of which ranks very high on the scale of creative human emotions. If the church is in the business of transformation, as I believe it is, then we must have some language to describe the process.

Once upon a time, the vocabulary of new life included words such as sin and salvation, penance and repentance, but these days we do not seem able to say them without stammering. We are more comfortable with words such as sickness and health, love and acceptance. These words place no blame, impute no fault, expect no change except the change from feeling bad to feeling better, as we are forgiven for being exactly who we are.

I remember a classmate of mine, a Lebanese Presbyterian, who threw a theological temper tantrum during his first semester in seminary. “All you Americans care about is justification!” he howled. “You love sinning and being forgiven, sinning and being forgiven, but no one seems to want off that hamster wheel. Have you ever heard of sanctification? Is anyone interested in learning to sin a little less?”

One way to sin a little less, as most Americans have discovered, is to shorten the list of things that are considered sinful. In many cases, the shortening has come from compassion. Suicides were once buried outside hallowed ground, and children born out of wedlock were not baptized in church. In other cases, however, the shortening has come more from expedience. Our national economy is grounded on acquisitiveness if not outright covetousness. There are a great many idols whom we trust more than God. Sex before marriage is so routine that virgin brides and grooms are as rare as comets. We call lying “spin” and greed “motivation.” What is to be gained from condemning such things, when people are going to do them anyway? Why not lose the word “sin” and find some more positive way to call forth the best in human beings?

The problem, as Paul Tillich reminded us almost thirty years ago, is that the great words of our religious tradition cannot be replaced. There are no adequate substitutes for them, and when we try to talk around them, we find our speech diminished. “But there is a way of re-discovering their meaning,” he said, “the same way that leads us down into the depth of our human existence. In that depth these words were conceived; and there they gained power for all ages; there they must be found again by each generation, and by each of us for himself.”²

Deep down in human existence, there is an experience of being cut off from life. There is some memory of having been treated cruelly, and—a little deeper, perhaps—the memory of having treated someone else cruelly as well. Deep down in human existence there is an experience of seeing the light and turning away from it, either because it is too beautiful to behold or because it spoils the dank but familiar darkness. Deep down in human existence there is an experience of reaching for forbidden fruit, of pushing away loving arms, of breaking something on purpose just to prove that you can. Deep down in human existence there is an experience of doing whatever is necessary to feed and comfort the self, because there is no one else to trust, no other purpose to serve, no other god to follow.

For ages and ages, this experience has been called sin—deadly alienation from the source of all life. By some definitions, it implies willful turning away from God. By others, it is an unavoidable feature of being human. Either way, it is a name for the experience of being cut off from air, light, sustenance, community, hope, meaning. It is less concerned with specific behaviors than with the aftermath of those behaviors. There are a thousand ways to turn away from the light, after all, with variations according to culture, century, class, and gender. The point is to know the difference between light and darkness, and to recognize the pull of darkness when it comes.

Several years ago I was in a preaching workshop with a woman who said that every time she stood up in front of her congregation, her stomach began to cramp. Sometimes the pain would increase to the point that she could not speak, so that she was forced to bring her sermon hurriedly to an end. Upon hearing this, another woman in the group said the most surprising thing. “It’s sin!” she announced. “There has to be sin in there somewhere, if it’s tearing your stomach up like that.”

Because this diagnostician had already established herself as a trustworthy person, we dared to explore her insight. As it turned out, the woman with the stomach problem had deep doubts about her worthiness as a preacher. She had grown up in a household where little girls’ voices did not count for much, and her eventual decision to go to seminary had met with her family’s disapproval. She furthermore had an “enemy” in the congregation, a woman around her age who consistently made cutting remarks

about her sermons.

She had never thought about her problem in terms of sin, she said, since she had always heard sin defined as self-aggrandizement. In our group that day, we discovered another definition of sin as self-negation. As different as the two definitions are, their aftermath is the same: a refusal of one's God-given place in community, with a resultant loss of life and health.

Beyond that, we also learned that sin can have physical consequences, and that our bodies may know things our brains have not yet discerned. This is an interesting connection, since the root word for salvation is *salus*, or health. "There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation," the psalmist laments before God, "there is no health in my bones because of my sin" (38.3).

Equally interesting is the way some clergy and some physicians are borrowing one another's language these days. While preachers may be heard referring to sinful behavior as "sickness," there are doctors who have begun to speak of smoking, overeating, and unprotected sex as "sin." But having turned the corner from focusing on *sins* to focusing on *sin*, let us not go back again. "It is true that we cannot be free from sin," said Saint Teresa of Avila, "but at least let our sins not be always the same."

According to Douglas John Hall, who has devoted his considerable energy to doing theology in a North American context, we do not ache for salvation from the same sins our ancestors did. Death, he says, was the prime motive for repentance a thousand years ago, when life expectancy hovered around forty and the only social safety net was the family. A human being did not have many choices, but heaven was one of them. You confessed your sins in order to win entrance to a better life after this one.

Five hundred years later, with a little more culture and disposable income available, death was not as big a threat as before. With more choices, however, a person risked making more wrong ones, and the fear of damnation took up where the fear of death left off. Guilt became the prime motive for repentance. You confessed your sins in order to win divine pardon, so that you and those you loved could look forward to the best afterlife possible.

While death and guilt still provide plenty of motivation for us, Hall suggests that they are no longer primary. We live in an affluent and psychologically sophisticated society, where death has been pushed back almost out of sight, and guilt is an issue for therapy. In our time, Hall says, what eats away at us is the gnawing suspicion that we may be superfluous—an accidental species with no real purpose on earth except to consume things until there is nothing left (but ourselves) to consume.³

When people feel superfluous, Hall says—when we are deprived of meaningful work, meaningful relationships, meaningful goals—when we cannot find a purpose big enough for our capabilities, then we frequently become destructive. Our destructiveness may be focused outward, resulting in crime and violence, or it may be focused inward, resulting in depression and addiction. Either way, the threat of meaninglessness is our primary motive for repentance, and salvation comes as we discover—or rediscover—purpose for our lives.

This description may sound too abstract for people who want to be told what they should and should not do, but it honors Tillich's advice about how to revive the lost, great words of our tradition. It is not enough for us to try to make people understand what they once meant. If we want the language to come alive again, we will plunge

back into the depths of human existence, where the words were first conceived and where they may once again be filled with power. It is work no generation can do for another, nor one individual for another. The church's job—and the preacher's job within the church—is to evoke the depths so vividly that sparks jump between the words and the realities they describe.

In our North American context, sexual transgressions and violations of church law may not be the sins we need most to address. We live in the richest, most powerful country on earth. We police other nations without their consent, and employ their workers for a fraction of what we would pay our own. We throw away more food each year than some small nations produce, and we have no rivals in terms of our despoilment of the earth. "We all live by robbing nature," writes the farmer-poet Wendell Berry, "But our standard of living demands that the robbery shall continue."

When we travel abroad, we are shocked to discover how universally Americans are disliked. When I went trekking with a group of fellow Americans in northern Greece last summer, I was advised to throw my passport in the bushes if we were harassed by any Greeks unhappy with the NATO bombing of Serbia. While I fortunately had no occasion to take that advice, the graffiti was unsettling. "Americans go home," was scrawled on everything from vacant buildings to dirty car windows. "Americans are killers of the people" was another favorite, along with some epithets about NATO that were too graphic for repeating here. Were the authors of those slogans all deluded, or do they see something in us that we ourselves cannot see?

While most Americans continue to cherish the illusion that we live in a classless, equal-opportunity society, our courts, our prisons, our public assistance programs, and our schools all tell a different story. It is difficult to believe that we are still debating whether hate crimes are really crimes, and whether guns are really problems. Meanwhile, our technological achievements serve not only to make the rich richer but also to make sure the poor will remain poorer. A first grader who does not have a computer at home will struggle to keep up with classmates who do. Computers may soon rival automobiles as possessions most necessary for survival in America—a prospect that cheers stockholders' hearts. At last count, Bill Gates' personal fortune equaled 43 percent of the assets of the American people combined.

In the face of realities like these, sin may be defined as failure to grasp the connection between one individual life and all other lives, including the life of God. A person who turns away from human suffering and need because the problems are "too big" is living in sin. A pastor who helps individuals cope with despair without exposing the cultural values that feed their despair is living in sin. A church that functions as a full-service neighborhood center instead of a pit stop for people engaged in the hard work of transformation is living in sin.

To use Douglas John Hall's language, the church exists so that God has a community in which to save people from meaninglessness, by reminding them who they are and what they are for. The church exists so that God has a place to point people toward a purpose as big as their capabilities, and to help them identify all the ways they flee from that high call. The church exists so that people have a community in which they may confess their sin—their own turning away from life, whatever form that destructiveness may take for them—as well as a community that will support them to turn back again. The church exists so that people have a place where they may repent of their fear, their hardness of heart, their isolation and loss of vision, and where—

having repented— they may be restored to fullness of life.

In a life of faith so conceived, God's grace is not simply the infinite supply of divine forgiveness upon which hopeless sinners depend. Grace is also the mysterious strength God lends human beings who are interested in learning to sin a little less. To repent is both to act from that grace and to ask for more of it, in order to follow Christ into the startling freedom of new life.

While particular sins come and go, and while the meaning of salvation bends to meet the threats of each new age, the job of preaching repentance is no different at the start of this new millennium than it has been in any other. Preachers are still called to connect the old language of faith with the fresh realities of people's lives. Our job, now as ever, is to dive down into the depths of human experience, trusting that God is there, and to emerge with old words full of new power, thanks to the life-giving spirit of the Word that continues to be made flesh.

Notes

¹ Richard Erdoes, *A.D. 1000: A World on the Brink of Apocalypse* (Berkeley, California: Seastone, 1998), 1.

² "You Are Accepted," quoted in Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin* (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1973), 47.

³ Douglas John Hall, *Why Christian? For Those on the Edge of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 47.