

Clean Up Your Act

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In Atlanta, the phenomenon of mega-churches which average thousands of people in attendance on Sundays continues apace. These churches are intentional about welcome and hospitality. They employ the latest technology in communicating with people. In one instance, the preacher of the day is beamed in, via video image, taped from another church service in another location the week before. The lights go down, and, hologram-like, he glides in from the darkness with a Bible in his hand to deliver the morning message.

The massive worship auditoriums around town are more likely to be filled with cushioned theater style seats than hard wooden pews, but such is not always the case. I recently worshiped with 3,000 or more people in a gigantic home-building showroom that has been refitted for worship. The seats there are close-together, hard-bottom, uncomfortable folding chairs, which didn't matter very much, because for a good portion of the service, we were on our feet singing and praying. (Personal revelation: I am pretty sure I won the Ms. Methuselah prize for being the oldest person in attendance.)

I cannot help being struck by the contrast between our emerging twenty-first century worship and proclamation styles and the rough-them-up-good approach John the Baptist took when he appeared on the scene in Judea, quoting the Hebrew Bible with a vengeance and preaching a gospel of repentance. John never glided anywhere. He *liked* shaking people up, and he didn't give a hoot whom he pleased.

Wild man that he was, he wore clothing of camel's hair. He ate a diet of locusts and honey, signaling a deliberate choice he had made to stand over against the conventional appetites of his day. Then, as now, nobody much had a hankering for bugs as a daily diet. Filled with fire and vinegar, his sermons showed a marked absence of sweetness and reassurance. To John, the good news was that God's kingdom was coming, but its arrival would not be for the faint of heart. In contemporary terms, it wouldn't be like Santa's sleigh landing on your roof with a sack full of toys for you, no matter what you had done or not done in the naughty or nice department. "Even now," he said, "the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that doesn't bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

One of John's favorite ways of addressing his congregation was to call them a "brood of vipers." Now, I ask you: Is that any way to win friends, influence people, and get the seats filled on Sunday morning? But here is the odd thing: people kept coming to hear him—great crowds of them. Matthew goes to great lengths to tell us that they came from Judea and from Jerusalem and from "all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sin."

Thirty years ago the renowned psychiatrist Karl Menninger wrote a book entitled *Whatever Became of Sin?* Behind Dr. Menninger's title lay the assumption that something had happened to sin, that the concept as it had been understood by western religious tradition for 200 years was disappearing—indeed, had already disappeared—from the modern mind, leaving our culture without an adequate vocabulary to use in

speaking of the inevitable brokenness of the human condition. His contention was that because they lacked a way to acknowledge their own sinful condition, many people had fallen into blame, blaming everyone and everything but themselves for what was wrong with their lives and with the world. At the same time, Dr. Menninger said a great many people were walking around with a vague depression that they could not seem to shake.

Modernity has taught us many lessons, but none has it communicated to us more clearly than this one: that we are to see every deed, even the most deviant criminal act, as a psychological phenomenon or as a sociological phenomenon or as the result of economic conditions or as the result of a biological response to environmental or genetic factors. The result is that we live in a time in which there has been an almost universal silencing of any talk about sin.¹

Could it be that people come to church not only to be affirmed and encouraged, but also to be burned with the fire of truth and made whole again by the life-giving power of repentance?

Why *did* so many put their faces in the furnace of John's consuming fire? I think it was because the people sensed his respect for them, a respect manifested in his willingness to tell them nothing less than the truth. His job was to prepare the way for the coming reign of God in the person of Christ Jesus, and he knew that in order for the people to be able to receive their salvation, they had work to do. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Now is the time to face up to the gap between who you think you are and who you actually are. It is not an easy thing to do.

Do you remember the old story about the incident at the traffic light? The light had turned green, and the car that was closest to the green light didn't move. The driver behind the first car blew her horn. The fellow in the first car remained oblivious to the green light. The second driver blew her horn again. The car still didn't move. The second driver sat on her horn, so to speak, along with pounding the steering wheel and saying a few words that couldn't be heard outside the car window but were clearly full of feeling. Finally, the fellow in the first car came to and drove off, just as the light changed from yellow back to red. The woman beat her horn again in frustration, and when she finished, she heard something knocking on her window. She looked up and saw that it was a police officer. Much to her dismay, he said to her, "Alright lady, get out of the car." She did. He handcuffed her, took her to the police station, fingerprinted her, and put her in a cell. Hours passed. Finally, she was taken back to the booking desk where the officer who had arrested her was waiting. "Lady, I am so sorry about the mistake," he said, "but I pulled up behind you when you were blowing your horn and cursing, and as I was sitting there, I noticed those bumper stickers on your car. One side said, 'What would Jesus do?' And on the other side of your rear bumper is that sticker that reads, 'Follow me to Sunday School,' and then there was that Christian fish emblem on the trunk, and so I was sure you had stolen the car!"

There is, at times, a gap between the person we think we are and the person we actually are. "Pay attention to the gap," John the Baptist says. Now is the time for you to get serious about living a life that is more reflective of the purposes of God. How do you do it? You do it by means of repentance. Repentance is not a word we hear every day, but it is a very good word. In Greek, it means "to change." It indicates a change of mind, a change of direction. As someone wise said, "No amount

of exertion will ever help a runner who is headed in the wrong direction.” To repent is to get faced in the right way, to look toward hope, to look toward possibility, to look toward transformation. Redemption—that is God’s doing. But getting yourself positioned for redemption, that is *your* doing.

Repentance is a number one agenda item in Advent along with hope, hope based on the promise that whatever there is about us that needs transformation, it can be changed through God’s grace and love.

I know that it is hard to hear that redemption is needed. If you want someone to tell you that you are okay and that I am okay and that even if we are not okay, it’s really okay, then John the Baptist is not the man for you. But if you yearn for a fresh start, if you want God to create a clean heart within your own human spirit, then John is just the one for you.

I think our biggest problem is that it is very hard to keep our lives very neat and tidy when we actually have to live them day by day. Everyday life is messy. Family relationships, personal ethics, larger commitments to truth, justice, and reconciliation: they are all subject to sin. Again and again, we have to turn away from our self-delusions and toward the Source of our salvation. Again and again, we have to remember that being the recipients of God’s saving grace does not mean that we have no responsibility for ourselves and the shape of human society. What we do matters to God.

No one except the masochistic-minded wants to be scolded or fussed at by the preacher, and yet, I wonder if our weekly tipping of the hat to our intractable sinful condition by means of a routine prayer of confession is enough to get at what truly ails us. I worry that we have lost a profoundly important aspect of the Christian life when we have lost sight of our radical dependence on God’s justifying righteousness, as revealed most unsparingly in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

In the 1980’s, I had the privilege of serving on the committee that drafted “The Brief Statement of Faith” for our Presbyterian denomination. By far, the most controversial part of that Confession, which is now a part of our *Book of Confessions*, was the line that reads, “We deserve God’s condemnation.” One unhappy Presbyterian suggested that the line read, “We deserve to be *evaluated* by God.” Another offered this: “*Some* people deserve God’s condemnation.” Ah, the challenge of admitting our need to clean up and shape up.

I remember the mother of a grown son telling me that her son had been accepted into graduate school at Columbia University and had gotten his first apartment in New York City. He invited his parents to come visit him. They complimented him on how great his apartment looked, how neat and tidy it was. “Thank you,” he said. “The trouble is that I get it all cleaned up, and three or four weeks later, I have to do it all over again.” Life is messy. Over and over, we acknowledge the mess, reset our course, and let God take charge of what is beyond our capacity to repair.

I wonder if we are not today experiencing a particularly damaging epidemic of self-righteousness. There is a lot of halo polishing going on, as well as an eagerness to label whole categories of people, as opposed to one’s own self, as sinners. Many who claim to follow Christ have forgotten his admonition to look at the beam in your own eye before you start beating up on everyone else. “Let those who are without sin cast the first stone,” he said. (John 8:7)

I just can’t see how judgmentalism serves the purposes of God very well. What

got John the Baptist going more than anything were the leaders of the religious establishment who came out to be baptized in the River Jordan. They were the ones he told off the most vigorously. Why? Because they were locked into the sin of smugness, and smugness has never borne any fruit except more smugness. He told them they needed to get a grip on their own sense of self-satisfaction. The One who was coming could make them whole, even the Zealots, even the Sadducees, but he couldn't get to them if their own goodness was taking up all the room. Or, as the great old Calvinist doctrine would have put it – pride is the enemy of hope. First comes the courage to name the truth, which is usually easier said than done.

In the months that have passed since the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the death of Trayvon Martin, it has become clear that matters of race remain one of the most fraught areas of American life; yet, when was the last time you heard anyone admit to the sin of racism?

Recently, *Sojourners* magazine reprinted a piece written by Editor Jim Wallis in 1987. How scorchingly true his words sound today:

In spiritual and Biblical terms, racism is a perverse sin that cuts to the core of the Gospel message. Put simply, racism negates the reason for which Christ died—the reconciling work of the cross. . . . There is only one remedy for such a sin and that is repentance, which, if genuine, will always bear fruit in concrete forms of conversion, changed behavior, and reparation. While the United States may have changed in regard to some of its racial attitudes and allowed some of its black citizens into the middle class, white America has yet to recognize the extent of its racism. . . . much less to repent of its racial sins.²

If we ever move forward as a society today without the pernicious reality of racism, it will be because we have admitted there is a problem, rather than claiming in a puffy-chested way that we have become a post-racial society. Only when we have repented of past denial can we turn in the direction of righting long-standing wrongs and living with genuine respect for one another. Denial might be the longest river in Egypt, but it is also the great massive stone that seals us off from the future God wants to give.

On the first Saturday in Advent a few years ago, I went by the church to get a book I had left on my desk. I heard sounds in the sanctuary, so I walked down the hall to see what was going on. I came upon the sight of several ladies, each standing on a different ladder while stuffing shiny green magnolia leaves into the window sills. They brought to mind the thought that Advent is all about getting ready. It is about creating an environment in which God can build a new world and a new you and a new me. None of us is ever going to be perfect, but we *can* clean up our act and get ready for God to come among us in the form of Mary's baby, the world's best hope, our merciful Savior. Hear the voice of the one crying in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord." Get up out of your hard wooden pew. Get up out of your cushioned seat and pray, "Lord, bring your winnowing hook my way."

I have no way of knowing the nature of the mess you might have brought with you to church. We all come exactly as we are. Perhaps you did something long ago about which you are still ashamed. Perhaps your burden has to do with what you

wished you had done and did not do. I do not know the nature of your regret, and you do not know mine, but I do know that there is no burden too heavy for God, no ego too grand for God, no trough of regret too low for God. I do know that there is absolutely nothing about you or about me that is beyond God's capacity to redeem. Friends, fear not John the Baptist or his message of repentance, for therein lies the path to your salvation.

Notes

1 Ronald Goetz, "Sin-Talk in our World," *The Christian Century*, May 1-23, 1990, 524.

2 Jim Wallis, "America's Original Sin," *Sojourners* (November 1987).