

Preaching Toward True Repentance

Thomas G. Long
Cambridge, Maryland

“One can tell the age of a tree by looking at its bark. One can also tell a person’s age in the Good by the intensity and inwardness of his repentance. It may be said of a dancer that her time is past when her youth is gone, but not so with a penitent. Repentance, if it is forgotten, is nothing but immaturity. The longer and the more deeply one treasures it, however, the better it becomes.”

— Søren Kierkegaard, *“Emissaries from Eternity”*¹

“Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the other people living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you, but unless you repent you will all perish just as they did.”

— Luke 13:4-5

The Christian faith proclaims that repentance is essential, to the Christian life of course, but also crucial for humanity in general. Given the vexed nature of every human life, repentance is a necessary practice for all who strive to be honest to experience, responsible to others, and whole as human beings. How strange, then, that true repentance is almost impossible to find in our society.

Take the case of baseball superstar Pete Rose, who died at eighty-three this past fall. Rose was undoubtedly one of the greatest baseball players ever to grace the game. A key figure in Cincinnati’s legendary Big Red Machine teams, Rose’s strong hitting, gold glove fielding, and hard hustling style made him an icon to baseball followers everywhere and an idol especially for young fans. Voted to the all-star game a remarkable seventeen times in his career, he was, it seemed, sure to be a first-ballot inductee to baseball’s Hall of Fame.

But those who really knew Pete Rose were aware that there was a different person lurking behind the astounding athlete. “He was Charlie Hustle on the field,” wrote sports columnist Thomas Bowell, “Pete the hustler in cheesy business ventures off it.”² Eventually it was revealed that the hustler in Rose had touched the third rail of professional sports by betting on baseball while still active in the game, including placing wagers on his own team. Consequently, he received the ultimate stiff-arm from the game he loved. He was banned from baseball permanently, the door to the Hall of Fame he coveted so dearly, closed and locked.

Rose, aggrieved, fought mightily for restoration. For years, he showed up at Hall of Fame induction ceremonies, signing autographs (for a fee) and making his case for restoration to all who would listen. At first, he tried the timeworn approach

of many snared in wrongdoing: lying and special pleading. Despite a freight car full of evidence against him, for fifteen years he denied any involvement in gambling. Finally, realizing that his denials were implausible, Rose switched tactics. In a tell-all autobiography in 2004, self-pityingly titled, *My Prison without Bars*, he at last admitted what he had done, confident that the mere act of confession at this late date would wipe the slate clean and usher him, with trumpets resounding, into his rightful place in the Hall of Fame. In the book, he complained that he had been unjustly singled out, saying that if he “had been an alcoholic or a drug addict, baseball would have suspended me for six weeks and paid for my rehabilitation.”³ In the book’s epilogue, he pleaded for American-style redemption, namely moving on and letting bygones be bygones. “I’m sure that I’m supposed to act all sorry or sad or guilty now that I’ve accepted that I’ve done something wrong,” he wrote. “But you see, I’m just not built that way. So let’s leave it like this ... I’m sorry it happened, and I’m sorry for all the people, fans, and family that it hurt. Let’s move on.”⁴

When baseball didn’t move on, Rose soured into bitterness, which he carried to the end. Convinced that an admission “I screwed up; let’s move on” was the magic formula to absolution, he never grasped the nature of honest repentance. In fact, he played every move on the chess board to avoid honest repenting. Now that Rose is dead, baseball may ultimately decide to forgive and to admit him to the Hall of Fame. But what Rose wanted was never forgiveness. He never really believed he needed that. What he desired instead was simply forgetfulness, a cost-free shrugging of the shoulders, which he thought was his due. He thought the mere passing of time should provide a passport to amnesty. “I’ve been suspended over thirty years,” Rose carped. “That’s a long time to be suspended for betting on your own team to win. And I was wrong. But that mistake was made. Time usually heals everything. It seems like it does in baseball, except when you talk about the Pete Rose case.”⁵

The Near Impossibility of Repentance

Because Pete Rose was a celebrity, his sad case has been widely chronicled. But Pete Rose’s desperate scramble to avoid repentance is representative of countless less-heralded and more everyday people in our society. We have somehow backed ourselves into a cultural trap where honest repentance is as rare as white truffles. Repentance has always come with a cost, but we find ourselves at the place where either we do not see the need for repentance ever, or, if we do, the cost seems too high for most of us to bear.

At first, church life seems to be an exception. Every week many congregations, in the confessional sequence in liturgy, lift up the centrality of repentance. Worshipers kneel or bow, and they repent, admitting to God, in words such as those in the *Book of Common Prayer*, “that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed” that “we have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves,” and pleading for forgiveness and restoration. “We are truly

sorry and we humbly repent . . . 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.”

But if we momentarily put down the prayer book and listen with a discerning ear to the intonations, it becomes apparent that our hearts don’t seem quite in it. We hear the words of repentance, but we do not hear much deep sorrow nor do we see much beating of breasts that accompanies true remorse. We are like that character in the old commercial, “I’m not a doctor, but I play one on TV.” “I’m not a true sinner, but I play one in worship.” As Stanley Hauerwas once wrote in this journal,

[I]t remains the case that though we know we may be sinners, we have trouble taking that description of ourselves all that seriously. We know we are not perfect, but most of us think we are good enough. The truth is most of us are conventional people who lead good conventional lives. It is not at all clear to us that we are all that sinful, but as I suggested, we are willing to try to play being a sinner for God’s sake—at least at Lent.⁶

And indeed, here comes the reflective season of Lent, demanding that we do more than play at remorse, do more than merely think deeply about the concept of sinfulness or meditate at length on the idea of repentance, but instead insisting that we actually do the thing itself: repent. In Lent, there is an amplification of the reality that hums in the background all seasons of the Christian year, the urgency of repeatedly turning away from the distractions that have captured our fleeting imaginations, from the desires that lured us away from our faith, from the sins that have ensnared us and dragged us down toward death, and then turning again to the source of life, to the mercy of God. Repentance involves the courage of deep introspection, the honesty of authentic confession, and an earnest move from the far country back home.

So why, then, are we so reluctant to repent, or even to acknowledge that we need to do so?

Perhaps Hauerwas is right. Most of us know we aren’t perfect but are convinced that we are nevertheless “good enough.” Recently, in the small weekly lectionary study group of which I am a part, we wrestled with a biblical text that included the word “wicked.” One pastor in the group balked at the term, saying, “You know, I don’t think of myself as wicked. There are wicked people in the world, I’ll admit, but I am not one of them.” The rest of us knew what he meant and indeed felt some kinship. All of us were ready to admit that we were “sinners,” at least in the mild sense that we occasionally are short-tempered with others, often more self-centered in our desires than we should be, sometimes reluctant to show love to difficult people, that sort of “sin.” But wicked? None of us had committed murder, embezzled funds, or planted a terrorist bomb. Like having Covid, we were ready to admit that we were infected with the disease of sin, but that we, thankfully, had only mild symptoms. “Wicked” we were not.

But such a distinction reflects a misunderstanding of the nature of sin. The ancient biblical stories tell the story of a common human experience of deception,

rebellion, and treachery. The narratives of our first ancestors failing in Eden are not historical accounts of some pollution of sin that entered the river of history at an early point in time and which flows from that headwater to stain our own experience today. They are instead myths, stories that are true not because they were true at some point in the past, but instead stories that are true because they are always true, true every day, true about us all. The stories of Eden are not origin stories (Adam and Eve sinned one day and, therefore, we continue to be responsible for their transgression) but existential stories in which we recognize the way it is with human beings. The Bible tells a story of the way things were at the beginning of human time in order to disclose the reality of who we are in the middle of time.

The Catholic theologian Herbert McCabe says that we know the truth of the Eden stories when we admit that we live in a society, despite many efforts of ethical people, that is nevertheless based on fear, “driven by fear of poverty, starvation, prison, torture, and killing.”⁷ This fear is not the exception to the rule, the fly in the ointment. This fear is, in fact, the water in the aquarium, the world in which we live. McCabe continues:

This is what, in John’s gospel, Jesus calls “the World.” This is what we are born into. This is what we are enmeshed in ... When we speak of “original sin” we are not referring to some ancient and original sin of our first parents ... But when we speak of original sin we mean the sin we have from our own origin in this world: not a sin we have committed, but a distortion of our world which leads us away from God, a distortion that leads us, when we encounter love, to crucify it.⁸

If we are honest with ourselves, we recognize our participation in this distortion, our inclination to push away the love of God. “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love,” goes the old hymn. Yes, it is not insignificant and a very good thing when one stops short of murder or child abuse, but such restraint, however laudatory, should not deceive us. To create a class of people who are genuinely “wicked,” people who are worse sinners than we, is simply a way of deflecting blame away from ourselves. All human wanderings and rebellions are springs that arise from the same underground river of death. To admit “that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed” and that “we have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves,” is the honest to God truth.

To own the truth about our sin can be the soil in which compassion grows. Yes, there are murderers and torturers, people who have lost their way so tragically that their destructiveness can be seen in dramatically cruel ways. But to know that we ourselves are lost in the same dark forest undercuts self-righteousness. An honest acknowledgement of our sin also magnifies the wonder we experience in the face of God’s mercy. It is said that when we see the picture of the criminal on the website, television screen, or newspaper page, we see what God sees when God looks at us. Salvation is not an *hors d’oeuvre* God offers to his best friends at a garden party; it

is a rescue from death God performs for God's mortal enemies. "[W]hile we still were sinners Christ died for us," Paul wrote. "[I]f while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life" (Romans 5: 8, 10).

Among my own tribe of left-of-center Christians, there is another reason why repentance is rare. We fancy ourselves as the kind of open-minded and progressive Christians who are eager to show forth righteousness, to seek justice, to combat racism, to address poverty, to be a prophetic community in society. Having taken the high moral ground, we are able, perhaps, to acknowledge that we are technically sinners, but we are often quite unable to admit that sin has us in its grip and that we need to be rescued. Like the rich ruler who came to Jesus, we have arrived at our moral standing through virtue, and if there is anything we still lack, we will work our way out of it on our own steam, thank you very much. Entranced by the old gnostic deception that the human plight is not one of captivity to sin but of a lack of enlightenment, we polite, deeply responsible, socially conscious Christians are often quick to tell ourselves that we are the righteous ones in this world.

Churches like my own rightly strive to practice a different kind of Christianity than the culturally bound churches around us. We are proud of the fact that we resist being co-opted by the white nationalism and the jingoism of much that passes for Christianity in our culture. But when a church specializes in being just, it can so easily lose awareness of our participation in the human condition and the accompanying need for repentance. Our role, we say to ourselves, is to point out the sins of society, but, funny, it is always someone else's sin, never ours. When we get the nagging sense that our own righteousness might not be entirely pure, we coo to ourselves that we may have drifted into error here and there but that we can educate ourselves back into rectitude. If there is anything missing, we can study our way to get it.

As Robin R. Meyers insists, in *Saving Jesus from the Church: How to Stop Worshiping Christ and Start Following Jesus*, the point of the Christian faith is not any idea that Jesus is a savior. Never. To emphasize Jesus the savior is, in Meyers's view, a weak, childish, and idolatrous religion, a confusion of the messenger, Jesus, with his message, enlightenment. Jesus, Meyers says, teaches the wisdom of righteousness. We should follow Jesus, he argues, not worship him. To worship Jesus is to choose a distorted story of Jesus's life as "a rescue mission that trumps . . . wisdom."⁹

But we know better. In our hearts, we know better. We know that Psalm 51 is not just David's prayer of confession, but ours too:

For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you alone, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment (Ps. 51:3-4).

We also know better about the gospel, that the gospel story is precisely a rescue story, a story of a world gone astray and lost, liberated by the love of God in Christ. Jesus's very name means "God saves." As the Book of Hebrews beautifully expresses it, Jesus, who was "the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being" (1:3) was "spoken" into a suffering, lost, and captive humanity. Jesus became "like his brothers and sisters in every respect," and yet without sin (4:15), "so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people" (2:17). Jesus was "not ashamed" to call broken human beings his brothers and sisters (2:11), as he held us by the hand and led us to salvation. According to Hebrews, the theme song of the gospel was sung by Jesus himself, who having lived a life of trust in God and obedient suffering, reentered the realms of Glory triumphant in his saving mission, shouting with joy, "I am home, and I have the children with me" (2:13).

The gnostic-tinged theology of much progressive Christianity tends to replace the grateful confession that "God ... even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved," with a more worldly "Knowledge (gnosis) is power." This suggests, perhaps, one more reason why repentance is rare in our experience. Knowledge sometimes leads not to power but to self-deception and finally to self-destruction. Repentance requires that we stand naked and unprotected before God and others, admitting our lostness and culpability. Everything in us resists such vulnerability. True repentance requires that we tell the truth about ourselves, the very truth we cannot bear.

In a remarkable essay, "Anxiety, Courage, and Truth," William H. Poteat, who taught Christianity and Culture at Duke Divinity School, spoke eloquently about the instinctive human fear of the truth. He noted that on hundreds of college and university campuses there are buildings with the following motto carved over their doorways: "You Shall Know the Truth, and the Truth Shall Set You Free."

Whenever he sees these bold claims that the truth sets us free, Poteat says, "my natural rejoinder is: 'The hell it does.' In the context of compulsive modern optimism these words lose all sense of paradox."¹⁰ In order to show that the truth, in and of itself, does not set people free, Poteat probes three primary myths in our culture—Oedipus, Adam and Eve, and Faust. Each of these mythic narratives is the story of people who encountered the truth about themselves, but this truth did not set them free. To the contrary, facing the truth resulted in a catastrophic loss of innocence and a moral collapse. From these ancient formative myths, claims Poteat,

we learn that we are not simply available to our own conscious management; that we are in fact mysteries to ourselves. We learn too that there is painful, threatening, anxiety-producing truth about ourselves and about our human condition which we repress, concerning which we rationalize, from which we are forever in flight. And finally, we learn that none of us can face these

without courage—indeed a courage which itself appears to us unbidden from our own intractable depths.¹¹

In other words, none of us can face the truth about ourselves without courage, and, ironically, the source of that courage does not lie within. It is a courage that comes from without, a courage that comes not as a human achievement, but as a gift from God. Indeed, Poteat reminds us that in St. Paul's world there were no universities, no proud buildings to bear the optimistic claim, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." What Paul had was not a university but a savior, a faith "that Jesus Christ had overcome both sin and death; that He had deprived them of their binding power upon the human imagination."¹² It was this faith that nurtured the human courage to seek the truth, indeed that birthed the very idea of a university.

Here, then, is the deepest irony: the words "you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free" are not true ... except in one and only one context: the one who first spoke them, Jesus Christ. In the context of the mercy and forgiveness of Christ, human beings can open our eyes wide to the full truth about us, others, and the world.

Preaching Toward Repentance

The affirmation that Jesus Christ is the savior who gives us the courage to face the truth points to at least one more reason why repentance is rare in our world, and it is a dramatic reason. The fact is that repentance is rare because, apart from the embrace of the gospel, nobody of sane mind would ever actually repent. Repentance as a naked act is an obliteration of the self. Here is a prayer of confession from one of the major prayer books:

Eternal God, our judge and redeemer, we confess that we have tried to hide from you, for we have done wrong. We have lived for ourselves, and apart from you. We have turned from our neighbors, and refused to bear the burdens of others. We have ignored the pain of the world, and passed by the hungry, the poor, and the oppressed.¹³

Anyone who seriously confesses these words is standing up in a public place and admitting to God, to other people, to oneself that one is a moral failure devoid of the good. Who would do that? Who could face the truth, much less admit it out loud, that at the core of one's being is a creature who has fled from ultimate reality, who has committed evil, who has rejected all responsibility toward others, who has been indifferent to the care of others and utterly selfish in the face of human need. To admit such things is to be incinerated as a human being. Taken by itself, honest repentance is self-obliteration, a form of moral suicide. No right-minded person would engage in such an act. No one can say such things and then simply lay aside the sackcloth, put on work clothes, and go to the law firm, insurance agency, gift shop, or clinic. We know the ancient human story. No human being stands in a clearing in the garden

and honestly confesses. We just don't do that kind of thing. Instead, we hide from the presence of God among the trees of the garden.

This is why it is important to underline that Christian repentance is never a solitary and naked act. It is not standing all by oneself in a clearing in the garden and blurting out the truth. We stand not alone, but with Jesus Christ standing by us. Only one who knows the love and mercy of God can truly repent. To admit one's sin is to stand under the judgment of God, but the one who repents also stands under the promise of God. In the light of the gospel, the repentant sinner, as Barth taught, is one who knows that the promise of God has already been given, the future of life in God has already been anticipated.¹⁴

To put it more concretely, because we have to do one thing after another in liturgy, the usual sequence in worship goes prayer of confession followed by the assurance of pardon, but in fact, the promise of pardon not only follows the prayer of confession but also precedes the prayer of confession, indeed surrounds it. If we did not know we are forgiven, we would never confess our sin, in fact wouldn't even be aware of our sin and the need to confess. Only one who already knows the truth of God's forgiveness and restoration can muster the courage to admit one's failures. Only in this sense do we know the truth and find that the truth sets us free.

In the ancient baptismal service, those who were to be baptized would turn toward the West, toward the world, toward the darkness, and would spit on Satan and renounce all of his lies and empty promises. They would then turn toward the East, toward the brightness of the rising sun. They would "orient" themselves ... literally. While they were facing West, the priest would change into a resplendent white and golden robe, so that when the baptizands turned around they would see a radiant symbol of the joyful kingdom toward which they were going. They had just performed an act of repentance, but one not provoked by shame but beckoned by the glory of the new land toward which they now traveled. By repenting they had not just changed their values; they had changed their citizenship from the old world to the new. Repentance is not just looking into the dark abyss of our failure. Repentance is a turning: a turning away from sin and a turning toward the light of God. Only those who already know that the light even now shines in the darkness have the courage to repent. This is an important truth for preaching. No one is motivated to honest repentance by guilty shame. Love is the only motivation.

Consider the Lenten text Luke 13:1-9, a conversation between Jesus and the crowd about repentance. The conversation gets going in the previous chapter, when Jesus informs the people that are pretty good at meteorology but not so keen on theology. They know quite well that a wind whipping up from the south signals a hot day on the way, but they don't have a clue how to read the "the present time" (12:54-56).

A few people in the crowd sputter in protest. As a matter of fact, they insist, they do know very well how to interpret the signs of the times. What about those Galile-

ans who went to the temple only to find themselves slaughtered by Pilate's armed guards. If they had only known that death was near, they would have gotten their lives in order. You want a sign of the times, Jesus, well there!

So, in the view of the crowd, the Galileans who were slaughtered needed to repent. It's always someone else's sin. We are good at pointing away from ourselves, but Jesus will not let us or them get away with that ploy. Do you really think "those Galileans were worse sinners than other Galileans, or worse than you?" Jesus said. "And don't give me that noise about those poor victims on which the tower of Siloam fell. They were no better or worse people than anybody else in Jerusalem" (13:2-4). And then Jesus turns on the terrifying searchlight: "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did" (13:5).

So, what is Jesus saying, that these people better repent from their sins or else God is going to slaughter them in the temple or make a tower fall on them? No, the key is what comes next, the parable of the barren fig tree. In this parable, a fig tree is not producing fruit and hasn't been for years—a symbol of the unfruitful, unrepentant people of God. The owner of the fig tree has had enough and bangs his fist into his palm: "Cut it down!" This, of course, echoes the earlier warning John the Baptist thundered beside the Jordan: "Bear fruits worthy of repentance. . . . Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (4:8-9).

But then the gentle gardener, who is after all Jesus, intervenes. "Let me give this tree some tender care for one more year. Perhaps it will bear fruit. If so, well and good. If not, then you can cut it down" (13:8). This "one more year" of mercy is the true sign of the times, the ministry of Jesus shining in the darkness, proclaiming "the year of the Lord's favor" (4:19). What is the sign of the times that discerning people see? It is not falling towers and flashing swords and bloodshed. CNN chronicles that stuff every day. No, the real sign of the times is the saving mercy of God in Jesus, a present sign right in front of our eyes. This is the true call to repentance, not a call to collapse in human shame or to run in fear from falling towers, but a call to turn around, to turn away from the barrenness of a life given over to death and to turn toward the brightness of one who brings freedom and gives life. Only those who know of the promise of God's love and mercy have the courage to repent. To turn is to have a future in the promise of God; to refuse to turn is to continue to embrace the powers of death. To refuse to turn is to be paralyzed in a posture of rejecting grace. To refuse to turn is to choose citizenship in the land of death when the way to the land of freedom has been opened up before us. "Unless you repent you will all perish; unless you turn you forfeit the chance to embody the promise of life."

So, if we want to preach repentance in Lent, then we should first preach the gospel of promise, mercy, and forgiveness. The first word of Lent is not that we have sinned but that we are loved. Only when we are assured of grace can we ever tell the truth of our unworthiness, only when we have been invited to the feast of

God's abundance can we come admitting our poverty of spirit and deed. To believe the gospel of love is to be able to honestly repent, but more, to make again the turn we first made in our baptism. To leave behind the lies we once embraced and to turn back to the way that leads to life. That's how the prayer of confession ends, in our desire that "we may choose your will and obey your commandments; through Jesus Christ our Savior."¹⁵

Channah Page lives in an intentional Christian community in England with her husband, Allen, and her ninety-year-old mother, Ruth. She wrote recently about memories of her father, Josef Ben-Eliezer, a holocaust survivor. Her father told her that, as a Jewish child growing up in Poland, he remembered neighbors going house-to-house in their village in the days before Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, asking each neighbor for forgiveness and seeking to set any wrongs right. Her father remembered that "they would eat *lekach* (a kind of sponge cake) and drink a glass of wine together"¹⁶ as the culmination of a long day of fasting and prayers.

But then, in 1939 the Nazis invaded Poland. Jews were no longer permitted to gather in the synagogue, but her father remembered that they would observe Yom Kippur despite the prohibitions. "[S]ince it was Yom Kippur," he said, "we met in one of the houses anyway, to hold our prayers. I will never forget that ardent crying-out to God for his intervention and protection."

Page's father witnessed many terrible things in the war, too many. Not only did he see first-hand the atrocities of the Nazis toward Jews, he himself fled to Russia only to be exiled to Siberia, where he experienced near starvation. Josef Ben-Eliezer witnessed the cruelty of others, but, when he looked honestly at his own life, he also found himself to be the author of cruelty. "He had deep regrets," writes Page, "about the part he had played in the expulsion of the Palestinian population from a small town called Lod as a member of the Israeli Army in 1948."

The burden of all of this suffering and guilt was too much to bear, and Ben-Eliezer became an atheist, never celebrating Yom Kippur again. But then, through the mysterious workings of grace, there was a dramatic change in his life. He found himself gathered into the love of Christ. Page describes what happened: "Long years of desperate searching followed until he found what he never believed possible—a place where all sin and evil is atoned for, a place where all of creation finds redemption: the cross where Jesus died."¹⁷

Page reported that, when her father was elderly, she would often come home to find him with his old Jewish prayer book in hand, listening to a cassette tape recording of the Yom Kippur service. The part of the service that moved him the most, the part he would play over and over, tears in his eyes, was the cantor's personal prayer of confession, sung before the service. He had written down his own translation of the Hebrew:

Here I stand, lacking in good deeds and in fear and trembling before the throne of the God of Israel. I come before you to beg for mercy for your

people Israel who have sent me. Even though I am unworthy and unsuited for the task, I plead to you, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob: Lord, Lord, compassionate and merciful, God, Shaddai, awesome and fearsome. May you bring success to my task of pleading for compassion for me and for those who sent me. Do not reckon my sin or my evil deeds against them, since I am a sinner and evildoer. May they not be put to shame by the evil I have done, nor may I be put to shame because of them. And receive my prayers as of one of the elders who has a good reputation among the people. Rebuke Satan not to mislead me. And may love to you be the essence of our prayers. And cover all our misdeeds with love.¹⁸

“What meaning did this prayer hold for my father, who had experienced the reality of forgiveness through Jesus?” asked Page. “Surely he must have felt that in a deep way it pointed to redemptive suffering, and that each one of us in our own way only finds forgiveness through repentance.”¹⁹

Late in his life, Josef Ben-Eliezer’s memories of Yom Kippur and prayers of repentance led to concrete action. He traveled to the village of Lod and met with a Palestinian who had been driven out in 1948. “This man graciously accepted my father’s apology and granted him his forgiveness,” wrote Page. “This moved my father deeply and gave him hope that one small act of forgiveness could start a healing process that could spread from person to person like ripples through a pond.”²⁰

The great turning of repentance, the move away from darkness and toward the light, is possible not because the darkness is so deep and shameful but because the light of God’s mercy is so dazzlingly bright.

Madeline L’Engle, who wrote enchanted fiction for children and youth, was a devout Christian with a strong conviction about the breadth of God’s mercy. Her books were banned from many Christian bookstores because of her views on the wideness of God’s grace. God’s salvation, she believed, was for all the sheep, “All the strayed and stolen sheep. All the little lost ones.”²¹ In one of her essays, she told the legend of Judas’s repentance:

There is an old legend that after his death Judas found himself at the bottom of a deep and slimy pit. For thousands of years he wept his repentance, and when the tears were finally spent he looked up and saw, way, way up, a tiny glimmer of light. After he had contemplated it for another thousand years or so, he began to try to climb up towards it. The walls of the pit were dank and slimy, and he kept slipping back down. Finally, after great effort, he neared the top, and then he slipped and fell all the way back down. It took him many years to recover, all the time weeping bitter tears of grief and repentance, and then he started to climb up again. After many more falls and efforts and failures he reached the top and dragged himself into an upper room with twelve people seated around a table. “We’ve been waiting for you, Judas,” Jesus said. “We couldn’t begin till you came.”²²

Notes

1. Søren Kierkegaard, "Emissaries from Eternity," in *Provocations* (Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing House, 2007), 41.
2. Thomas Boswell, "No One Loved Baseball, or Damaged It, as Much as Pete Rose," *The Washington Post* (October 2, 2024), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2024/10/02/pete-rose-tom-boswell/>
3. Pete Rose, as quoted in Don Burke, "Pete Rose Was Unapologetic to the End," *The New York Post* (October 1, 2024), <https://nypost.com/2024/10/01/sports/pete-rose-was-unapologetic-until-the-end/>
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. Stanley Hauerwas, "Repentance: A Lenten Meditation," *Journal for Preachers* (Lent, 2019), 38.
7. Herbert McCabe, *God, Christ, and Us* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 66.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Robin R. Meyers, *Saving Jesus from the Church: How to Stop Worshiping Christ and Start Following Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 44-45.
10. William H. Poteat, "Anxiety, Courage, and Truth," *Duke Divinity School Bulletin* (January 1, 1966), 205.
11. *Ibid.*, 207-208.
12. *Ibid.*, 210.
13. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 58.
14. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.1.2.57 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 115.
15. *Book of Common Worship*, 58.
16. Channah Page, "The Meaning of the Day of Atonement," *Plough* (October 11, 2016), <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/why-is-the-day-of-atonement-important-for-christians>.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. John Wilson, "A Distorted Predestination," *Christianity Today*, 47/9 (September, 2003), 73.
22. Madeline L'Engle, "Waiting for Judas," *Plough* (March 24, 2024), <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/culture/holidays/meditations-for-lent/waiting-for-judas>