

Repentance: A Lenten Meditation

Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-9; I Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

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Theologians often make doubtful Christians. I do not mean they make other Christians doubt whether they are or want to be Christian. That may happen, but that is not what I mean by describing theologians as “doubtful Christians.” The doubt I think that often characterizes the life of theologians is meant to describe how theologians are often unsure if they are Christians. They are so not only because they are exposed to intellectual developments that seem to make many Christian convictions problematic. But the problem is deeper than such challenges to the faith. The problem is quite simple—theologians get paid to believe in God.

I have made a good living by being a theologian. If I had ever quit believing, at least if I were a person of integrity, I would have had to find another job. But the very fact I have been paid for being a theologian cannot help but create in me questions about my identity as a Christian. The matter is complicated by the fact that most of us identified as theologians in our day are more likely to be servants of the university rather than the church. Theologians cannot help but wonder if we are Christians because we assume the objectivity characteristic of university disciplines demands a distance from what we assume is our subject. That distance is often called “objectivity,” which names a stance we are to take to show that we know we cannot teach what Christians believe as though what they believe might be true. At one time theologians were paid by universities to be or at least to pretend to be Christians. That has changed, but it is still the case that university theologians cannot help but entertain the thought that we are more likely to be playing at being a Christian rather than being one.

Why am I imposing on you these pathetic anxieties from the world of theology? I do so because I suspect in some ways the kind of worry that may bedevil the theologian; that is, we fear that more likely pretending to be a Christian rather than being one pervades many lives—not just those of the theologian. I think this is particularly true at a time like this, namely Lent. Lent is a time when we are to examine our lives in the hope that through such an examination, we will discover and repent of those sins, those impediments that stand in the way of our being disciples of a crucified savior.

We are able, obligated might be a better word, to undertake such an examination because, as we are told in I Peter, “Christ suffered for sins once and for all in order to bring us to God.” Yet it is hard to avoid the sense that we are playing at being sinful. We cannot help but think this is some kind of game. It is almost as if God wants us to be sinful because God is, or at least we are told God is, a God of forgiveness. So in order to help God be a forgiving God, we have to play at being sinners—at least during Lent it seems to give God something to do.

For example, think about our Gospel for today. After John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God. He said, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news.” We, of course, are quite glad that the kingdom has drawn near, but it is by no means clear

why the kingdom drawing near means we need to repent. Nor do we know what we have done or not done for which we should repent. We are not even sure we know what repentance looks like or entails.

But this is Lent, so we are willing to try to come up with something. After all, we have some sense that we often do something we later regret, so we know we are not perfect. I should not have been as candid with Mrs. Smith as I was, but she can really get on my nerves. I know I am a bit selfish, but when everything comes out in the wash I do my bit for others. I know I should not lie, but if I had told the truth to X or Y, they would have been hurt. You can add to this unending list of our petty failings. After all, we confess we have sinned not only by what we have done but by what we have left undone. What we have left undone cannot help but cover a range of behaviors that are sufficient to make us sinners.

That said, however, it 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. If we do not stand in need of forgiveness, God, as I suggested above, would have lost God's day job.

That we may have the haunting thought that we are only playing at being a sinner, I suspect, involves the more general worry that in the world in which we now find ourselves, we are not at all sure if we know what it means to be a Christian. I suspect we are not even sure we know what being a Christian looks like. Surely to be a Christian means more than being a nice person who believes stuff about God. There is, after all, the Sermon on the Mount. But then that is one of the problems: we cannot imagine living out the demands of the Sermon. But because we cannot imagine living lives the Sermon seems to envisage, we cannot help but fear that we are only playing at being Christian.

Something seems to have gone decisively wrong with our attempt to be a repentant people. I think the problem is quite simple. The reason we find it hard to avoid a sense that we are playing at being sinful during Lent is itself a manifestation of our sinfulness. No sin is more basic than the presumption, a presumption schooled by our pride, that we can know on our own what it means to say that we are sinners. Too often I fear our attempt to examine ourselves to discover our sins turns out to be an invitation to narcissism.

Barth rightly argued that we are only able to confess our sin on our way out of sin. I fear that too often the revival tradition of trying to make people feel guilty for their sins so they will ask for forgiveness makes sin an intelligible designation prior to grace. Barth's way of putting the matter rightly assumes that the very presumption that we might be able to determine what our sins may be is a sin. That Jesus calls us to repent is his right alone because it is in his light that we can even know what our sins may be.

We do not come to Jesus because our sins need to be forgiven. Rather we know we need to be forgiven because Jesus has come to us as the One alone capable of revealing who we are without that knowledge destroying us. Never forget, we, that is the laity, get to shout every Easter, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" The presumption that we now know better is just that presumption that reveals sin's hold on us.

We tend to think of sin as something we do, but sin is more like a power that possesses us rather than something we do. Possession often expresses itself in the language of choice because to be possessed is to live in a manner that assumes we are our own best creator. To sin is not to do what may be generally thought to be wrong. To sin is to offend God.

Sin, therefore, is not a generalized category to designate that we have done something for which we are later sorry. Sin is an offense against God who, as our Psalm indicates, is a Lord of compassion and love, and exactly because God is so, we have revolted. We only know we are sinners because we are first loved by God. To confess that we are sinners turns out to be a theological achievement because sin is not a general description that people can understand whether they are Christian or not. In short sin is not a naturally given category. That non-Christians use sin to describe some failing in their lives is a left-over from a past age when Christian speech was assumed a “given,” but that time is quickly disappearing.

As Christians we believe that we must be taught to be sinners. That training comes by being confronted by the Son of God who, as Karl Barth has put it, “has accused us by turning and taking to Himself the accusation which is laid properly against us, against all men, against every man. He pronounced sentence on us by taking our place, by unreservedly allowing that God is in the right against Himself—Himself the bearer of our guilt. This is the humility of the act of God which has taken place for us in Jesus Christ.”

The good news is we do not get to be our own judge. We do not get to determine what our sins may be. The devil, the great tempter, would have us believe that we should want to be like that false god, the lord, who we assume to be self-sufficient, self-affirming, self-desiring, the supreme being, self-centered and rotating about himself. The problem, of course, is that is not the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ. That God, the God that has come to us in Christ, is sufficient to Himself, but that sufficiency is the love that has constituted the life of the Trinity from all eternity. Our sin quite simply is our refusal to be loved by such a God.

What could possibly account for such a refusal? In a lovely book of prose poems entitled *Tears of Silence*, Jean Vanier writes:

I fear
the mysterious power of compassion
compassion requires that I have found myself
and no longer
play the game
of putting on a mask, a personage
pretending to be
appearing

Compassion requires
That I become myself
accepting my poverty
letting the Spirit breathe
move
live

love
in me
opening my being
without fear
to the delicate touch
of God's hand
accepting that I am loved
as I am
with my fears and frailties
with my intelligence and competencies
with my heart and with my hopes
free to be myself

What a startling thought by Vanier. Could he possibly be right that we fear the mystery of compassion? I suspect he is right that we fear compassion because God is compassion "all the way down." Accordingly we fear God because we fear knowing who we are. But God has overwhelmed our fear by compassion itself. The name of that compassion is Jesus. We have been made part of that compassion, the compassion that is Jesus, through the sharing of his body and blood. Accordingly, we have little use for our doubts about whether we are really Christians. So do not worry about whether you are really a Christian. You may think you are only pretending to be a Christian, but by God's grace, God makes us what we pretend.

This is Lent. Repent! Recognize that those self-centered worries about whether you are really a Christian do you or God no good. Rather use this time, this sacred time, to prepare to meet the Christ who for our sake "suffered for sins once and for all in order to bring you (and me) to God."