

***Speaking Words of Repentance***  
Scriptures: Psalm 32; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32  
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**I. Introduction**

A number of years ago when I was doing my doctoral work, I focused my academic study on an early Anglican bishop from the 17th Century whose name was Lancelot Andrewes. And Bishop Andrewes was a very remarkable man. He was a brilliant linguist and translator. He was the foremost preacher in England in his day and a very holy man -- he'd spend five hours every morning in prayer, preparing himself for his work -- and by all accounts lived a very exemplary life. But when you read his daily prayers, they are filled with prayers of repentance, of extraordinary depth and feeling, long prayers bemoaning his many places of sinfulness. And it's so striking to a modern ear that it almost comes across as neurotic. But it has occurred to me that perhaps part of the reason that it feels so unusual is that we hear words of repentance so rarely from public figures in our day or from each other, and the process of engaging in repentance is so fundamental to who we are as Christians and how we engage in Christian conversation together.

We are moving through Lent and during this time this year we are looking at the discipline of listening, how do we listen to each other with carefulness in a way that facilitates meaningful conversation and builds community and heals divisions?. We are at a place in our country's history where there are some very dramatic divisions that we see on stage on a regular basis in our presidential campaign. So, how do we engage in meaningful dialogue with people who are in different places than we are? We are also moving as a denomination towards General Conference in May which is when our church resets all of our church laws, and our church is deeply divided around a number of issues, as you know. So, again, how do we engage one another with healthiness and allow the Holy Spirit to move through these conversations?

**II. A Season of Repentance.**

This Lent we're taking all of our scriptures from the lectionary, and the scriptures from the lectionary for this fourth Sunday in Lent really focus on the role of repentance, how repentance goes about removing the barriers and allowing holy conversation to happen.

This process of repentance is fundamental to what Lent itself is about. Lent is the season where we work on removing the barriers, the places of brokenness that separate us from one another and separate us from God, and this beautiful Psalm 32 is a wonderful conversation about what that process is about. This is one of our seven traditional penitential psalms, and was one of St. Augustine's very favorite. St. Augustine actually had it painted on the wall opposite his bed while in his last days so

that he could spend all of his time preparing for death by reflecting on this beautiful psalm. And the psalmist notes that whenever we sin, whenever we create brokenness with another person or with God, that has dramatic impact on everything about how we live. What the psalmist wants us to understand is we can't have brokenness in our relationships with somebody else and then just go on as though nothing had happened, because one way or another that brokenness has got to be dealt with.

So, in this wonderful image, he says, "Since you've got to deal with the brokenness of our sin, then don't be stubborn like a mule that has to be guided with a bit and bridle." And it's a wonderful image of sort of being forced to go in a particular direction. And by way of talking about that in his or her own life, what the psalmist says is, "When I couldn't acknowledge my own sin, my body wasted away." In other words, because I'm not dealing with this, the elephant in the room, that takes a toll on who I am. And in reality, we have often experienced that. I don't know how many of you have had a difficult broken relationship that you've had to deal with, and that has a physical impact on you. Whether you start getting back pains or you start overeating or undereating, we've got all kinds of interesting subconscious ways of trying to work through the brokenness that we have caused in relationships.

So, what the psalmist suggests to us is rather than being led by a bit and bridle, own up to the places in your life where you have created brokenness and deal with them head on because what happens then is you remove the blockage that has kept healthy relationship from happening and healthy relationship with God from happening and you allow the Holy Spirit to move through and offer new life. New life in relationships, new life with God. And that's a hard process for us because most of us spend a lot of time avoiding those painful places where we have created brokenness. It requires a willingness to look inside in ways that are very, very uncomfortable. There's a bruising to our ego self that happens as we engage in that process of self-reflection and seek to learn self-awareness. And we all resist this. This is why everybody laughs when Janet Craswell in her time with the children this morning said through the puppet, "Okay. I'm sorry." Because our kids all do that and we find adult ways of often doing that also because we don't want to have to deal with the pain of looking at those places where we have fallen down.

And what the psalmist says is healthiness, healthiness for us, healthiness for our relationships, healthiness for our relationship with God depends on our willingness to look at those dark shadow places in our own lives and own up to them and ask forgiveness in the appropriate places. We can't experience the new life and transformation that God is always seeking to offer us until we get those blockage places out from our lives. When we can name our sins specifically and ask for forgiveness, that's when our lives start to change.

And I've got to say, dear friends, I think our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters have something to offer us on this, because the Roman Catholics have this rich history of engaging in a process of repentance. It's one of the sacraments in the Roman Catholic Church. And we all do prayers of repentance, like we're going to have

communion in a few minutes and we always start with a prayer of repentance, right? We all do this together and we all say, "Forgive me for the things that I have done, the wrong and the things that I have left undone." It's a little bit vague, if you know what I'm saying. It's not that it's not true but it's pretty easy to blow through those words without having to do much introspection. And what the psalmist is inviting us to do is bring some seriousness and intentionality to the process of introspection so that we can start to see where those places of sin have occurred. Now I'm not suggesting that we go back to a system where you all confess to the clergy your sins on every week before you take communion, but I am suggesting it is important for each of us to take some time in our lives to reflect on where those places of brokenness have happened.

St. Ignatius of Loyola taught a wonderful way of doing prayer that he called the *Examen* which is taking some time every single day before you go to bed and running through the events of the day and identifying not only those places where you have seen God at work, which sensitizes you to the movement of the Holy Spirit, but also those places where we have failed. And I'm not talking about big stuff. I'm not talking about stuff that you could litigate or is criminal. I'm talking about all of those little, tiny places where my own ego need got in the way of listening to someone else, where my own greed caused me to do something selfish, where I was not as attentive to the needs of somebody else as I should have been. And dear friends, we all do this every single day, amen? All of us have points in the day when we fall short of the perfect love that God invites us to live.

And I'm not saying that we spend a lot of time beating up ourselves for this. I'm saying that if we never look at it, we don't develop the ability to see it coming and we fall into the same patterns over and over again and then that sinfulness, that brokenness becomes habitual. And what St. Ignatius invited us to do is every day take a few minutes and find those places as you review your day where you could've done something a little bit better, in a little bit more life-giving way and pay attention to that, because that's how we start to turn around our patterns of destructiveness.

Because, see, here is the truth, dear friends, righteousness in Christian tradition is not about being sinless. It is not about being perfect. And we all often seek to be perfect. What righteousness is about in Christian tradition is identifying those places where we have fallen, where we have created barriers between ourselves and God, where we have broken relationship with one another, identifying them, repenting of them, asking forgiveness, real forgiveness, and then moving on. Because once we have done that, we can let it go. We have been offered God's forgiveness through the cross and, therefore, we can let those places go once we have acknowledged them.

### **III. Putting Repentance into Practice**

So, one of the places that we do this obviously is where the things that we have done that have caused brokenness in our relationship with God. Reflecting on those and identifying those. But then the question, of course, becomes where has that

brokenness happened with the people around me in my life that I love or maybe don't even love, where have I created division and brokenness, where have I hurt somebody else, identifying those places and offering your sorrow and repentance, saying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry that I did that to you," and how do we move forward from here? Because once we can articulate that, we open up the space for real conversation to happen.

We are often in conversation with people that we have hurt, intentionally or unintentionally, significantly or in small ways, and that place of brokenness sits in the middle of that conversation and doesn't allow healthy holy conversation to happen. But when we can identify it, when we can speak those words, we can remove that and allow real life-giving Holy Spirit conversation to happen.

This is true in our individual relationships. It's also true in our corporate relationships. Because often the places that we have been engaged in brokenness are not because we explicitly or overtly did something that hurt somebody, but we have been participants in systems that have hurt people and we need to be aware of where those are happening as well. So, I love this quote from Dr. King that's on the front cover of your bulletin where Dr. King says, "We will have to repent in this generation not merely for those vitriolic words and actions of bad people but for the appalling silence of good people."

Now we've got lots of vitriolic words that get bandied about in an election cycle, so there are explicit places where you can identify where hatred and brokenness are happening. But what Dr. King is inviting us to do is to be attentive to the places that we have participated in systems that have hurt and broken people or hurt and broken situations like our environment. Most of us don't feel as though we are actively engaged in the destruction of our environment until again we start paying close attention thinking, "You know, I could've turned the light switch off when I left the room. I could have used that wonderful Metropolitan drinking vessel rather than using more and more plastic." Where are all the places that we can start to heal the woundedness of our actions?

A century and a half ago, there was a point in our church's history when we had integrated churches technically, but all of the white folks sat on the ground level and all of the African American folks were relegated to the balcony. Well, 150 years ago or so, I don't remember the exact date, at Foundry United Methodist Church, which is where I grew up, a group of the African American congregants said, "You know what, this is not what God calls us to be about." And they left the church and they founded a new church which became Asbury United Methodist, which is a handful of blocks from Foundry and a predominantly African American congregation. Well, that all happened, of course, a long, long time ago.

A few years ago Foundry held a service of repentance to apologize for the brokenness that the Foundry community had caused that resulted in Asbury being a separate church. So, they had a joint service with Asbury, a service of repentance and

reconciliation, and then everybody marched down the street and finished up the service at Asbury as a way of symbolizing that that's not who we want to be about now.

Now, none of those folks were part of a system that drove out the African American members of Foundry and caused them to join a new church, but they all recognized that they were part of a system, and continue to be part of a system, in which racial divisions occur. And this is a way of acknowledging that. We all are part of systems that perpetuate brokenness, whether it's income inequality or racial divisions or gender inequality or the segregation of LGBTQ folks in the life of our church, all of those places where brokenness continues to be perpetuated largely by our silence. Where are those places in the life of your day-to-day living that you could speak a word of wholeness and healing and don't?

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Confession, repentance, asking forgiveness is to open the doorway to freedom and reconciliation. It is a gift that God gives us to allow the movement of the Holy Spirit, not an obligation that God has laid on us. And on a day when Jesus was listening again to the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes as he welcomed in those who were marginalized in his community, he told a very powerful story, which you could do a whole series of sermons on, but I want to just draw your attention to one piece, which is that when the son in this story has after having deeply offended his father and broken all of the taboos in his community, finally identifies that his living has been destructive to others and destructive to himself, and he turns and returns to his father, the father is waiting by the window watching for the son to return. And in a place where many of us may have welcomed the child home and then said, "Let's talk about the ramifications of what you did," the father throws all righteousness and all decorum to the wind and in a way that a father in ancient Palestine would never have done, runs down the road -- I brought this picture up here because it's such a powerful image of that moment -- runs down the road and throws his arms around his son to welcome him home. That's how God yearns for us, to turn away from those places of brokenness, to return home into the embrace of the one who loves us more than we can ever, ever imagine.

Amen.