

Jeremiah 8:4-8
Matthew 4:12-17
Text: Matthew 4:17

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REPENTANCE IS NOT A SIN

This is Lent, a time for coming clean with God, so that, when the death and resurrection of Christ roll around, we have good reason to recognize their consequences for us.

In T. S. Eliot's play, *The Cocktail Party*, Celia Coplestone tells Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly, the psychiatrist and soul doctor of the play:

"I've never noticed that immorality
Was accompanied by a sense of sin:
At least, I have never come across it."

When Sir Henry, true to his profession, presses Celia about her family's point of view on these matters, she says:

"I had always been taught to disbelieve in sin.
Oh, I don't mean that it was ever mentioned!
But anything wrong, from our point of view,
was either bad form, or was psychological."

The church in our age faces a dilemma of similarly veneered morality, more accurately, a crisis that strikes at the very nature of the church: it is the trivializing of sin. To be sure, it is not a new problem. It was present in the self-indulgent urbanity that T. S. Eliot parodied at mid-century; it was present three thousand years ago when King David, strolling on the roof of the Jerusalem palace, saw another man's wife, Bathsheba, bathing, and sent for her to be brought to his bed; it lurked among the primeval mist of Eden, as when the man sputtered to God, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." It is the problem of our acknowledgment and ownership of sin as a people who have entered into a promise-making covenant with God and now, often, would rather not recognize the terms of the contract. The question is not whether we have sinned, no one can claim that pristine state, but whether we will name it and say, "O Lord, I have sinned," or, like Celia Coplestone, will only call it "bad form" or some other mild aberration that is vaguely "psychological." As Celia's near namesake, Ted Koppel, once reminded the graduates at a Duke University commencement, the Decalogue is not ten suggestions or ten recommendations but ten commandments." And we Christians have accepted them as the basis of our constitution, promising that God will be our God and we will be God's people, though we tend not to endorse them all equally, especially the first four that relate to God, and the last commandment.

The reason that we do not bring ourselves to cry with the psalmist, "*mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*" "O Lord I have sinned, I have sinned, I have greatly sinned," is, I suspect, our sense that we devalue ourselves by such an admission. Besides, we say, "I am not a bad person. I have committed no felony." It is as though we view repentance itself as a sin. But it is not just we who are devalued by this reluctance to come clean, we also devalue God. We make God and God's authority over us to be of little account.

The truth is that we already value ourselves too little, and we are reluctant to repent because we sense that we will devalue ourselves still more, even publicly. So we play subtle games much of the time, building little public charades, compensating for low self-esteem through sleights of masquerade and pretense, projecting images of character that present us most favorably, especially toward those we know less well (whom we perhaps feel we can convince more easily), and even toward our best friends out of fear of losing their esteem

and respect. We play a *game*. Isn't it interesting that in the language we employ we think and talk about "winning" people over or needing to know who the "players" are in negotiations. We use verbs like "orchestrate," "engineer," and "finesse." Will Willimon surmises that one of the reasons we are drawn to marry is that we search for someone who will accept us at base value, one with whom we do not have to play games, someone who will be steadfast when we are at our best, and at our worst, someone who knows us, warts and all, and still takes us in. Now here's the best news: *this is precisely what God does*. God values us infinitely, even while knowing us intimately. Perhaps one reason it is so hard to make a full confession is that repentance demolishes pretense.

We also have this intense, if for vanity's sake suppressed need to be forgiven, to be reconciled. Ernest Hemingway once told a story that illustrated this need and the popularity of the Spanish name Paco. A father, he said, journeyed to Madrid to put an ad in the local paper. It read:

PACO, MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANYA,
NOON ON WEDNESDAY. ALL IS FORGIVEN. PAPA.

Come Wednesday, the authorities had to muster a squadron of the *Guardia Civil* to disperse the mob of 800 young men who massed on the street in front of the inn.

God, too, does not hold a grudge, but says to all, "Come home, all is forgiven." Jesus put it this way: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," a plea that we tend to hear as negative imperative but which Jesus intended as a positive invitation to a glorious new state.

To not repent is an insult to God to whom we have made our promises; the God whose principles we are pledged to live out. It's like living in a household where one knows of the sin of the other, but that other is unwilling to acknowledge the sin. Again there is a great difference. In family life we may fear that the other may not forgive us. With God, there is no question that we will be forgiven. But first we must ask.

In his book, *Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society*, Ted Peters tells us how faith that is founded in a knowledge of forgiveness enables us to see what we could not see before, namely, how sin, which is to say the arrogance of self deception, is an insult to God. He writes:

I worked for a few years as a reference librarian in the Columbus (Ohio) Public library. The librarian in charge of the reference section and my immediate supervisor was Gretchen DeWitt. I admired and liked her, and she liked me in return. We enjoyed a fine working relationship. One Friday afternoon I was working on a particularly complicated reference problem. Knowing that the library would be closing in an hour or so, I was concentrating diligently to finish up. Miss DeWitt came to my desk and asked me to come to the workroom for a conference. I told her I was busy and asked if it could wait. No, it couldn't wait. I began to feel anxiety over time. I was frustrated at being interrupted. I began to remember previous occasions on which Miss DeWitt had interrupted me. Rage arose within me. Taking liberties that might strain our otherwise healthy working relationship I insisted that I keep to my project. She insisted with equal vehemence that I drop the work and go to the workroom. Then she turned and walked, expecting me to follow. I did. All the way I nagged her by complaining. She said nothing and walked on. Seeing that my complaining was ineffective, I scolded her. Then I raised the pitch of my scolding. Soon we arrived at the workroom door. We entered and I found the entire library staff standing around a table and lit candles and singing "Happy birthday" to me. Miss DeWitt had planned the party in my honor. How humiliated I felt. Once the truth of Miss DeWitt's graciousness became clear to me, I became aware of how I had insulted her. However, Miss DeWitt showed not the slightest sign of retaliation for my rudeness.

Our relationship to God through faith is similar. Once we understand that God forgives out of divine love, a sense of personal affront to God is added to any previous legalistic understanding of sin we might have had. Once we understand that God forgives freely, we become aware of our own ingratitude. This is not intended to be manipulative. Rather it is intended to be revelatory of the seriousness with which God takes the task of redeeming us.

We do not typically permit muddy boots on the champagne carpet in the living room. But when we do put aside our self-deception and come clean, ah, the embrace! Amen.

