

Getting Serious

Sometimes it feels like I've spent my entire pastoral career wrestling with two problems, one very practical and concrete (sometimes quite literally), the other more cultural and even theological, but both, I think, critical to the future of the church, the church, not just this church, and both of which have consumed an enormous amount of my energy. In a very real sense, it's pretty much what I've devoted the better part of my life to. From time to time I feel like I've made a little bit of progress on both fronts, though with the passage of time, I wonder if even my best efforts have had any real lasting effect. Certainly better than doing nothing, at least more responsible than doing nothing, but I wonder whether over the long run they've made much if any difference. And if I've learned one thing in all my years of ministry, it's that in the church, it's the long run that really matters.

The first of the problems I'm talking about is our buildings, and specifically, how churches are going to maintain their buildings in the future, particularly when we haven't done a very good job doing so in the past, when it was a whole lot cheaper to do so than it's going to be going forward. I don't have to tell those of you who have been here for more than a few years what a challenge it is. We put an enormous amount of effort and resources into our Preserving First renovations just a few years ago (six to be exact), and yet the moment we finished with that work, the clock started ticking all over again, and sure enough, we're facing another round of work in the very near future. And it *never* ends.

The second of the problems I've wrestled with over the years may be less obvious than the task of maintaining our buildings, but is every bit as challenging, and perhaps even harder to do something about. That is the slow but steady dilution (or corruption) of the church's traditional message by a kind of cultural religiosity that uses some of the same language but with very little substance. It sounds like religion, may even feel like religion, but when push comes to shove, there's just nothing there. As a result, a simplistic and often quite nebulous set of what are little more than feelings has taken the place of a serious wrestling with the complex testimony of the holy scriptures as they've been interpreted over the years in the church, resulting in an almost cartoonish version of life that utters soothing bromides but never really confronts the serious challenges that we as a society face. Against this, the church's efforts at Christian education, as feeble as they've been ineffective, have barely made a dent. So little, in fact, that the church seems for all practical purposes to have just given up.

I experienced a good example of what I'm talking about this past week while we were on vacation in Florida. While there, as I often do, I attended worship at a local Presbyterian Church, a church which shall remain nameless. The preacher that day was not the church's pastor, who like me was on vacation, but another minister on the staff who preached from the lectionary, just as we did here, on the Old Testament story of the prophet Nathan's confrontation with David after the murder of Uriah the Hittite. As I've said on many occasions, the story of David is one

of the most powerful parts of the Bible, so I was very interested in hearing what this preacher had to say about this great, indeed, this profound story about a great, but also a greatly flawed, man.

Well, the preacher summed up the story with three observations, and I actually listened to the sermon again this week on line to make sure I got this right. One was that we often need help to see things God's way, which is why God sent the prophet Nathan to help David see the error of his ways. Two was that God stands ready to forgive when we confess our sins, thus God sent Nathan to prompt David's repentance, whereupon God forgave him. And third was that God longs to redeem us and all that has gone wrong as a result of our sins, thus after a "little trouble" in David's own family — the preacher's words, not mine — everything worked out for the best with the birth of Solomon, a wonderful example of God's redemptive powers bringing forth goodness out of evil. Solomon!

I wanted to stand up and ask the preacher, "Did you actually read this story?" No doubt you'll be relieved to know that I restrained myself. But to me that sermon was a perfect example of what's gone wrong, what has taken the place in the church today of a serious and thoughtful engagement with scripture. All three of the points that the preacher made are true to a degree, but their application to the actual story that's found in scripture was at best superficial and at worst just flat out wrong. There wasn't a "little trouble" in David's family after the murder of Uriah. Unless you call a "little trouble" the fact that David's son Amnon raped his sister Tamar, and then, when David wouldn't do anything about it, another of his sons, Absalom, killed Amnon, and eventually led a revolt against David, seeking to remove him from the throne, the first in a series of civil wars that would eventually tear the kingdom of Israel apart. Solomon's birth, far from bringing all the discord to an end, only added fuel to the fire. In the eyes of later historians, it was, in fact, the beginning of the end, and if there was anything redemptive about all this, it would not be evident for literally centuries, and then only after the destruction of Jerusalem.

What's happened is that we've bought into the kind of cheap religion that Bonhoeffer called cheap grace, a religion that basically reduces our message to the claim that if we'll just confess our sins, if we'll just say we're sorry for what we've done, then all will be forgiven and God will clean up the mess we've made. Just say we're sorry, and God will kiss our boo-boos and make everything OK. Well, that's not what the Bible says, anywhere, and certainly not a message we can derive from the Biblical account of David's life. Yes, David confessed his sin to Nathan, and I don't doubt but that he was forgiven for his actions. But God didn't clean up the mess, not in David's lifetime. No, David had to live with the mess he'd made, a fact that came crashing down on him like a ton of bricks only later, with the death of his son Absalom, his beloved son Absalom.

You see, even though Absalom had led a revolt against his father, and come very close to deposing him from the throne, David still loved him dearly, and ordered his commander Joab to deal gently with Absalom should he fall into his hands. Scripture in fact makes a point of telling us that David said this in the hearing of everyone. "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom." Everyone heard David say that. The problem is that no doubt many times before David had given instructions to Joab "in the hearing of everyone," only for Joab to go out and do the opposite, knowing full well what David really wanted, which of course (like any politician) was deniability.

But here, a lifetime of such double dealing came back to haunt David, for this time when David gave instructions to Joab, he really meant them, he really did want him to deal gently with Absalom, though obviously Joab didn't realize that, and so when given the chance, he didn't hesitate even for a moment to kill Absalom. David was crushed when he heard what had happened. Crushed, not only because his son had died, but because David knew why, knew what had happened, knew exactly who was to blame, and that knowledge completely crushed David's spirit. He was never the same person again. "Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son." In a very real sense, David did die that day.

What scripture tells us is that while we are forgiven for our sins, and need not live our lives under the burden of that guilt, we are stuck with the consequences of our sin, whatever they may be, and those consequences don't magically go away just because we say we're sorry. In fact, those consequences may well extend beyond our own lifetimes. Scripture famously says, even to the 3rd and the 4th generations, and maybe even beyond, as was certainly the case with David. So when we suggest to people that if they'll only confess their sins, that everything is going to be fine, we're not giving them hope, we're setting them up for tremendous disappointment. But even worse is suggesting that if we'll only confess our sins, if we'll just say we're sorry, then we've done all that we need to do, and God will do the rest.

Which again is true as far as it goes. God will do the rest, God will clean up the mess, but it'll be in God's time, not ours. So if we'd prefer not to live for generations with the consequences of our sinful actions, then it is far better for us to tackle the job of doing something about them ourselves. We can't forgive ourselves for the original sin, that only God can do, but we can try to clean up the mess. Not just say we're sorry and be done with it, but own up to our actions and their consequences, and try to do something constructive about it, even if it takes a very long time. Because repentance doesn't mean just saying we're sorry. It means changing.

I don't have to tell you the sins of which we are guilty both as a people and as a nation, they are no doubt legion, but chief among them is the sin of slavery, and what is almost worse than the original sin, the failure to own up to that sin and do something about it when presented with the opportunity during the period that followed the Civil War, an opportunity that was bought at enormous cost. But when doing something proved more difficult than we'd expected, we washed our hands of that responsibility and just walked away. We just gave up, leaving African Americans in the South at the mercy of a vindictive population. The sad thing is that even now, we still haven't come to grips with that sin and its consequences in our history, except in the most trivial of ways with endless expressions of how sorry we are. Well, David said he was sorry, too, but the kingdom of Israel was still destroyed by his actions and those of his descendants after him. Just like the Bible says.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
to whom be all glory and honor, now and forevermore...*