



“Re-Formed Penitence”

a sermon by

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I am in the midst of reading Blood Done Sign My Name by Timothy Tyson. This is a book that all congregations of our Presbytery have been asked to read and discuss together. Tyson tells the true story of the ruthless murder of an African-American man in his small North Carolina town in 1970. Using this event as the focal point, Tyson vividly portrays the racial climate of that time and relates his experience as the white son of a Methodist pastor who spoke and acted out against the deeply embedded racism. It is that word “embedded” that I want to pick up on. Injustice is always embedded and that is what makes it so difficult not only to change, but also from the vantage point of the ones in power, to even see. As he relates this story, Tyson writes,

The King assassination marked my experience of race in an indelible way. In the year or so leading up to his killing, with direct exposure to black children at school – even if there were only two of them – I began to notice and confront my own received assumptions that white people were somehow better than black people. It wasn’t that I had been taught that explicitly, mind you – my parents *told* me quite the opposite – and yet white supremacy was like the water and we were like the fish, and of course we were all drenched to the skin. All social signposts of American life taught me that white people were superior in some vague and undefined way, but my particular world instructed me that nice white people must try to help blacks become more like white people. The astonishing arrogance and ignorance of these assumptions would be funny if those attitudes were not still fairly prevalent.

In the passage from Isaiah that we read today, we hear overheard Isaiah challenging the people of Israel to confront the exact same type of issue. Their embedded attitudes toward those not in power – the workers, the hungry, the homeless - have blinded them to such an extent that their worship has become empty. Worship and penitence for them has become an occasion to try to justify their own righteousness, to feel better about themselves – rather than to truly seek repentance – that is a turning from evil behaviors. In the poetry of this reading, we find Isaiah catching all of us. Verse 3 starts with Isaiah mimicking the questions of Israel to God: “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Now hear God’s response through Isaiah: “Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.” There it is – there is the huge disconnect that often happens between our worship and our actual way of living. Meaning is lost in this gap. Worship and penitence becomes a way to alleviate guilt, to soothe ourselves, to feel inspired, but then we go right back out into the society, culture, work system, family system, and relationships that we are so embedded in and find ourselves sucked right back into unrighteous ways of living.

This is partly why the season of lent and Ash Wednesday has often been left out of the Protestant church’s liturgical calendar after the reformation. Individuals such as Martin Luther felt like so much of the worship and rituals of the Roman Catholic church at that time had become empty gestures whose main purpose was to help the doer earn a release from guilt. Through his angst-ridden spiritual transformation, Luther broke

through his own embeddedness as a priest in this belief-system, and much as the prophet Isaiah spoke to the people of Israel, he spoke out against this distortion of faith. He started the re-formation of the church as he asserted that Christ already earned this release from guilt for us and therefore we are freed to live and called to live as a new people through the grace and love of God. Our worship and the sacraments therefore should point us to that which is beyond ourselves and our self-centered guilt to a direct encounter with a God of mercy. When our worship becomes oriented toward God instead of toward ourselves, then the I believe something amazing begins to happen – we are given the capacity to transcend all which seeks to pull us down into the mire, as our relationship with God and with others change. That is the power of what can happen if we believe in the meaning of what we do here this day. The following true story illustrates this point:

The story begins with a tragedy that we are unfortunately all too familiar with, as a 12-year-old boy named John was playing with a 9 year old girl named Marie and they came across a loaded pistol in a dresser drawer. Their play turned to nightmare as John accidentally shot and killed Marie. Everyone except John turned out for the funeral of Marie in this small town, but he retreated in horror into himself and refused to come out. Later that week Marie's older brother went next door to John's house and insisted and persuaded John to go to school with him. He had arranged with the principal to call a special assembly, and Marie's older brother stood up before the assembly with John and proclaimed, "A terrible thing has happened; my little sister was accidentally shot by one of your fellow classmates. This is one of those tragedies that mars life. Now I want you all to know that my family and John's family have been to church together this week and we shared in Holy Communion." Calling John next to him, he put his arm around his shoulders and said, "This boy's future depends on us. My family has forgiven John because they love him and Marie would want that too. And I ask you to love and forgive him, too."

No one would even begin to claim that the pain was over for either family in this situation, for as we all know pain, grief, and guilt can takes years to resolve and the holes left in our hearts are sometimes never completely healed. And yet here is a beautiful example of how a holy act of worship, the sacrament of communion, can help a person or group of people reach beyond themselves to heal relationships that could easily be permanently broken through anger, resentment, and blame. Marie's brother lifted up one whom he could have despised and gave him a place of love and honor in front of all his peers.

As we move into the season of Lent we need to remember a couple of important points:

First, as Protestants we have reclaimed the season of Lent as a time of spiritual preparation for Holy Week. It is a time in our liturgical calendar that is inextricably linked with Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday. It is a time of intentionality – a time when we ponder even more intentionally how Christ's

death on the cross, and his resurrection on the third day has inexplicably changed our lives and relationships.

Second, anything that we do as a spiritual practice during Lent should not be for the purpose of justifying ourselves but for the purpose of transforming our relationships with God and others – lifting us up out of our embeddedness in relationships that are unjust and unhealthy. Isaiah mocked the people who fasted and then turned right around and even without questioning what they were doing exploited others. Isaiah challenges them and challenges us to regard our worship as inextricably linked to our relationships and our relationships as inextricably linked to our worship.

“Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly.”

Let us pray, O Lord, may your spirit be upon us as we worship you, that we may be lifted up out of darkness into light, and know the true power of your love. Remind us that you have created us out of the dust of the earth and called us to be your people, a blessing to others in all we say or do. Amen.