

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

REPeNT – Engage

March 8, 2020

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Leviticus 6:1-5; Luke 19:1-10

The attorney told us that our action would be unwise. It would put us at risk. We should just let things ride and see what happens. It was an interesting moment in the life of the Coordinating Cabinet of the Presbytery of Detroit. We were faced with a rather unprecedented situation. A young man in the presbytery office who is African American, was working with his white supervisor, when the supervisor used the “N” word in a way that was intended, we found out later, to cause the young man “pain.” The young man had tried to go through the chain of command to deal with this and two more similar incidents, but according to a later inquiry, had had them essentially swept under the rug and his pain and concerns minimized or dismissed. Finally, he resigned and lodged the complaint on his own, without an attorney. The question before the Cabinet, which is the closest thing to a board of the presbytery, was what ought we to do? Some people said that we should issue a public apology. The attorney said we should not because it would admit our guilt and put us in a position of being unable to defend ourselves if the young man was to sue us. There was a choice to be made...

Isn't it amazing how after almost 2,000 years of Christianity, we followers of Jesus still manage to say and do things that hurt other people? Sometimes we say or do things without thinking, without any malice, yet we still bring pain and shame. Other times we say or do things with intent, believing that we are justified in our use of words or actions, and so the other person ought to learn from it, or perhaps we think that they even deserve it. And so, we leave a wake of damaged lives, damaged relationships and damaged churches. If we are honest with ourselves this morning, we know what it is we ought to do in response to the pain and damage we have caused. We ought to repent. We ought to remember what we have done and then feel remorse and return to the way of God. To bring everyone on board who was not with us last week, we talked about repentance beginning with remembering those times when we have sown damage around us. And when we remember them, we are to experience remorse, sadness for what we have done, and then we are to return to the way of God; the way of loving God and neighbor. But what I want us to see this morning is that while remembering, remorse and return are essential to repentance, there is another step in the process, and that is engaging for repair.

When we have done damage, when we say or do what harms others, it is not enough for us to get our act together, meaning remembering, being remorseful and returning. We are to take the next step and engage with those we have harmed in order to help repair their lives and our relationship. We can see this in our passage from Leviticus that when a harm has been done, the one doing the harm must work to make the situation right again. *“When you have sinned and realize your guilt, and would restore what you took by robbery or by fraud or the deposit that was committed to you, or the lost thing that you found, or anything else about which you have sworn falsely, you shall repay the principal amount and shall add one-fifth to it. You shall pay it to its owner when you realize your guilt.”* I realize that we might say, but I did not rob someone, I merely was unkind, or angry. Yet notice that the passage says, “or anything else about which you have sworn falsely, which includes anything we say or do that harms another. The Torah makes it clear what

we ought to do, we ought to engage with the other and do our best to repair what we have damaged...so why don't we do it? Why is it so hard for us to admit our guilt and begin this process? I ask because there appears to be this very human tendency to not want to apologize or take responsibility for our hurtful actions.

I have wrestled with this, and after much thought and research have concluded that we struggle with apologizing and admitting guilt for two reasons; loss of face and loss of power. The first thing we fear if we admit our guilt is loss of face. This concept may not be one with which everyone is familiar. One way to think of loss of face is to see it as losing the respect of others and feeling shame in the process. To see it visually, think of a child who is caught doing something wrong and is forced to admit it. They hang their head, not wanting to look at the parent. They have lost face because they have lost the respect of the parent and feel shame. This loss of face is painful and thus is to be avoided. The second reason is loss of power. As human beings we live in a world in which we are often powerless. Things happen to us that we cannot control. We seek to find control and one way is to say hurtful things to others because it places us in a position of power over them. To admit that we have done damage, that we have erred toward others and offer an apology is to give up that power. It is to say that we are in the debt of someone else and they can call in that marker. We are powerless and at their mercy. These are both frightening possibilities.

The question then confronts us, how do we get beyond these fears and move to repentance? How do we engage and work to repair the damage we have done? The answer is that we do a Zacchaeus. Let me explain. Zacchaeus was, as the story tells us, a tax-collector, meaning he was not only an enemy of the people because he collected money for a corrupt and oppressive regime, but he was also a tax-farmer which meant his living came not from a salary, but from the excess taxes he could force people to pay. The more he gouged the people, the richer he became. And according to Luke, he was very rich and very hated. In an unusual series of events, Jesus invites himself to Zacchaeus's house for dinner. We know nothing of the conversation between Jesus and Zacchaeus and Jesus over the meal, but what we do know is that during that dinner, something happens to Zacchaeus. He remembers, he returns, and he promises to engage and repair what he has done wrong. Listen to Zacchaeus. *"Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much."* Zacchaeus does not worry about losing face or losing power. He gets it. He understands that he needs to engage with those he has damaged and begin the repair. Jesus' response is telling, *"Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost."* Repentance did not make Zacchaeus lose face or power, it healed and saved him.

So, what ought we to do? That was the question before the Coordinating Cabinet. Should we listen to the attorneys or do something else? After some discussion, the vote was taken and an apology was not only sent to the young man, but it was entered into the record of the Coordinating Cabinet, and then read aloud at the next Presbytery meeting so that it is public record. We did a Zacchaeus, which by the way did not end with the apology, but is continuing with reforming how we supervise, how we are aware of the systemic racism in the presbytery and how we become more and more the beloved community God desires us to be. Repentance opened the way of healing for the presbytery and it can do the same for us, if we will allow it to so do. My challenge to you then for his week, is to look at your words and deeds, and if any of those did damage to others, ask yourself, how am I engaging with those persons to bring about repair, that both that person and I might find healing and hope?