

Preaching Repentance: Claiming the Gift of Our Humanity

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In his poem “The Shield of Achilles,” W. H. Auden depicts a world unburdened by repentance or its possibility. The scene is a simple one: Thetis, Achilles’s mother, has come to watch Hephaestus forge a shield for her darling son. Overlooking the blacksmith’s shoulder, Thetis hopes to find images of flowers decorating the shield or dancing girls moving to sweet music. Instead she sees lines of soldiers kicking up dust beneath a leaden sky, trampling weed-choked fields beside barbed wire fences enclosing inmates surveying the approaching misery. The penultimate verse of the poem describes a world shorn of any forgiving mercy:

A ragged urchin, aimless and alone,
Loitered about that vacancy; a bird
Flew up to safety from his well-aimed stone:
That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third,
Were axioms to him, who never heard
Of any world where promises were kept,
Or one could weep because another wept.¹

In a world uncradled by a covenant of love, there cannot be any promises because such can be ventured only where the most basic promise has already been kept. And there can be no tears because without the mercy that binds us to another, tears are pointless. One does not weep over statistics. There is only force, power, the grim victories of the strong over the weak. In the world of Achilles, the only shame is losing, the only guilt is in admitting defeat. What passes for repentance in such a world looks more like “show trials,” “struggle sessions,” and “re-education camps.” Such is the world of death, where even “the strong, iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles... would not live long.” This is a world where apologies are as pointless as tears.

That is the problem Auden’s poem raises. What if there is no forgiveness? What if the ideologues are right and the only answer is to silence others, dismissing them as “losers”? How does one become human in a world without mercy? Granted, we might find such a world unpalatable, but perhaps not. Nietzsche missed the thin air of heroic deeds and was weary with the claims of a slave religion that undermined what he regarded as true human excellence. And he is far from being alone in a culture like our own that celebrates winning, never apologizing, succeeding, and “just doing it.” Who are we to object to Achilles and his shield? Does the gospel have something to say beyond Thetis’s sentimental disappointment with the brutalities portrayed in Hephaestus’s forge?

Perhaps another question will sharpen our thoughts. If Achilles’s world is as grim as Auden makes it out to be, what is there in the gospel that would challenge such a hopeless view of human life? One might think it strange to latch on to the gospel’s word of repentance at this point, but could that word actually direct us to the hope that

seems absent from Achilles's shield? Repentance, after all, has a memory not just of sin but also of grace, and exists only as there is a prior mercy that summons it forth. It can still recall One whose promise was kept according to its crucified terms, and whose tears were wept for friend and foe alike. In death this One engendered life, and it is his mercy that makes tears possible, promises conceivable, our humanity visible even to us. *Ave crux spes unica* ("Hail to the Cross, our only hope").

In preaching repentance there is a temptation to think that it is a call to some pious virtue of our own that will, like spinach or castor oil, be "good for you." One must *earnestly* repent. One must *sincerely* repent. The matter is up to us. Accordingly, repentance does not seem to be much of a life-giving thing but rather like some stylized posturing that will be both painful and humiliating. That was Nietzsche's point. Besides, nothing is easier to fake than sincerity, and it is not all that difficult to render our penitent words innocuous by qualifications and conditions. In so much of popular culture today, "love" is not the only thing that means you never have to say you're sorry. This righteous cause or that will do just as well. In Achilles's world, and in ours, repentance remains something of an embarrassment, which is why we are so eager to "move on" and not even attempt to fake sorrow or regret. That way we will at least be more "honest," we think.

Yet such embarrassment ought to serve as a clue to us of repentance's remarkable power and the humanity it bodies forth. The image of that humanity is what frightens and causes us to belittle and dismiss repentance as some self-chosen hair-shirt or hypocritical pose. That way we do not have to deal with its questions, much less its demands. But just so do we miss its liberating depths and its life-giving hopes. We see only the weakness that we have learned from Achilles and others to dismiss as beneath contempt.

So what does that humanity look like? And how does repentance liberate and give hope?

Eric Auerbach offers an example in his remarkable book *Mimesis*. In his chapter on "Fortunata," Auerbach compares the way reality is depicted in the classical world of Roman comedy (Petronius) and history (Tacitus) with that of the New Testament, particularly the gospel of Mark. In Roman comedy, peasants are either figures of fun or objects of scorn. And in the aristocratic history that rehearses the deeds of "great men," the lower classes merely provide the necessary, if dismissible, background to fortune's favorites. The gospel, with its stories of Galilean fishermen, itinerant prophets, and wayward disciples, does not easily fit into this world. As an example, Auerbach invites particular attention to the story of Peter's denial of Jesus found in Mark 14. Peter, though a peasant fisherman, is not depicted either as a figure of fun or scorn. Nor is he dismissed as a "mere accessory" to the action. Instead, he "is the image of man in the highest and deepest and most tragic sense."² This gospel story concerns him profoundly. Though a peasant fisherman, he can weep over his own failures. The guilt and shame he evidences reveal a heart in conflict with itself, a weakness that, rather than diminishing Peter, makes of him a figure of immense moral significance. What is depicted here is nothing less than an image of a new humanity, the embrace of the most common of lives in the most everyday of occurrences as objects worthy of our deepest respect and attention. Auerbach sees how revolutionary this depiction of Peter's inner struggle is for the way we think about what it means to be a human being. In this portrayal of a common peasant's failure to remain faithful at the point

of crisis, a failure that the comic writers and historians of the classical world could never even contemplate, we “witness the awakening of ‘a new heart and a new spirit,’” which will set the “whole world astir” by narrating the impact of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection on all of us.³

Indeed, that is what makes the story of Peter’s denial and his subsequent remorse not just vivid or even compelling, but possible. The gospel tells of God’s entrance into this world in the most humble of ways, of his coming to those of lowly stature in the world’s eyes, and ministering to all sorts of people amidst everyday circumstances, and finally suffering rejection and an ignominious death on the cross. The guilt and shame that have ever attended the failures of disciples to bear faithful witness to Jesus Christ are but the residue of his love for sinners and can only be acknowledged and even claimed in light of Christ’s own self-giving. Barth is right: the knowledge of our sin is knowledge of Jesus Christ.⁴ As the creed reminds us, we do not believe in sin but rather in “the *forgiveness* of sins.” Our true brokenness and its full extent are revealed only in the light of that forgiveness embodied in Jesus Christ. We cannot even see it otherwise. But even in Christ, our brokenness is not what defines us. Rather, it is his love that refuses to be without those whom he has claimed and forgiven that defines us.

To repent is to claim that love, to risk living with its embarrassing grace, its searching mercy, its adhesive binding to those we have not chosen but who are given to us as fellow recipients of God’s mercy. Far from being some virtuous act of heroic penitence, repentance is the simple(!) act of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord, an admission that we are not alone but live out of his daily grace and mercy, gifts that are ours only as they connect us in him to others. That is why Calvin can think of repentance as a lifelong claiming of God’s mercy, a venture of faith that boldly seeks to live with and into the forgiveness that is ours already and will not let us go.⁵ Repentance, he maintains, is how we participate in Christ, how we are drawn again and again into his presence. Its very nature, its embarrassing claims, its persistent questions like those of Jesus to his own disciples, serve to cast unwelcome light on our desire to escape such mercy and to embrace the more lethal ways of an “heroic self.” The struggle to believe in the grace of God is always a struggle to believe in God’s forgiveness of us, of me. This is why such faith must be prayed for and such repentance risked even amidst our failures, hypocrisies, and follies. For just so do we bear witness, broken as it may seem and be, to the reality of God’s mercy and the remarkable gift of our forgiven humanity.

And just so does repentance engender hope. In scripture such hope is sometimes portrayed as a coming home. The prodigal who comes to himself finds his way home, and almost before he can put together his little speech of repentance, he is surprised by his father who has run to meet him. In his father’s house there is not recrimination or ridicule, but joy. “Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,” the hymn sings, “but yet in love he sought me, and on his shoulder gently laid, and home rejoicing brought me.” Or as Isaac Watts would have it in paraphrasing Psalm 23, we find the gift of our forgiven humanity not within ourselves, much less in our virtues, but as those who have returned to their Father’s house, “no more a stranger or a guest, but like a child at home.”

At other times repentance takes the form of agonized admissions of guilt and desperate pleas to be made whole. One thinks of Psalm 51, “A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone into Bathsheba.” What is striking about this psalm is not the sincerity of David’s pleas or the eloquence of his words, but his confidence that the God, who is quite aware of David’s sinfulness and who will not let that sinfulness pass without judgment, is, nevertheless, the God whose mercy endures forever. David asks for mercy first, before even confessing his sin, acknowledging that his penitent pleas are risked in the knowledge of God’s own disposition: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions.” Asking to be washed thoroughly from iniquity, requesting “a clean heart,” makes no sense unless there is faith in the God whose justice knows something of forgiveness and whose mercy is deeper than the idea of every person getting what he or she deserves. Hope emerges out of the grace of a forgiving God, not from the precision of our wins and losses.

Scripture also knows that repentance takes time. God’s forgiveness and our need of it are never cheap or easy. The almost novelistic account of Joseph and his brothers makes it clear that just as forgiveness precedes repentance, neither happens overnight and often only after significant burdens of suffering and guilt are carried a long way. The apostle Paul reminds his Galatian friends that his striking reversal from persecuting the church to serving as its chief evangelist to the Gentiles, however sudden that may have been, required him to spend 3 years in Arabia before conferring with Cephas and James in Jerusalem, and then another 14 before returning to Jerusalem to lay his calling before the apostles gathered there. The lifelong repentance which Calvin described as the nature of the Christian pilgrimage has its roots in the story of Israel (40 years in the Wilderness!) and the church. Repentance, as living into the forgiveness of God, is the way disciples are formed. It takes time.

Repentance also has a social context. Jesus’s encounter with Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) and his parable of the unforgiving servant (Mt. 18:23 ff.) make that clear. To be forgiven, much is to be given the wherewithal to forgive the small debts owed to us. And if we cannot attempt at least that, then the mercy we have received will look much more like a consuming fire of judgment.

Models of Repentance

Repentance is hard, a clue to the challenge of living the Christian life. Like the risen Lord who inspires it, repentance asks tough questions. And some of these questions are not easily untangled from the self-interests of others and, it must be admitted, ourselves. For example, what might it mean for those of us who have enjoyed the fruits of others’ labors to acknowledge our debt and address faithfully ways to honor it? If repentance is the means by which we affirm the grace of the risen Lord, should we not listen to those pressing their claims? One does not have to offer solutions here or pretend that our obligations can be met by dismissing such claims with gifts of money in the hope that we can dismiss the claimants as well. Money may well play a role in such repentance as we are led to make, but the risen Lord who asks us such uncomfortable questions may have even more costly forms of hope to present to us.

The Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt, for example, issued by the Evangelical Church

of Germany in October of 1945, confessed publicly of the church's failure to witness faithfully during the Nazi years. The council that issued the declaration repented of the wrongs that had been visited upon other nations and peoples through its own inadequate witness. Left unsaid was anything about the Jews, about the church's complicity in the policies of the Nazis, about its own failure to support those who opposed the Nazi regime. Nevertheless, this confession of guilt, seen by some as a weak political capitulation to the victorious Allies, seen by others as wholly inadequate, created hopeful space for a vision of humanity responsible before God and accountable to God for the lives under its care. It was well-received by few, an indication that repentance is not to be undertaken to gain popularity or sway public opinion, much less to explain things. It is an attempt, however belated, to tell the truth, however painful.

Sometimes repentance is not nearly so public. John Profumo was a high-ranking member of Harold Macmillan's cabinet in the early 1960's. A married man, Profumo carried on an affair with a 19 year-old woman, who had previously been involved with a Soviet diplomat. British government officials warned Profumo that his affair was compromising him in his role as secretary of war. The affair became public, and Profumo, when questioned in Parliament, lied about his involvement. When it became clear that he lied, Profumo resigned in disgrace.

But his disgrace and the lurid details of his affair are the least interesting parts of Profumo's story. His marriage survived, and he began, quietly, working at a settlement house in East London, at first performing rather menial tasks and then later becoming their chief fundraiser. He worked at Toynbee Hall for the next 30 years. He never wrote about either his failure or his repentance, never gave an interview or sought to capitalize on his story. He served. Later in life he was honored for his service, but such honors were neither sought nor celebrated. As a model of repentance, Profumo said nothing, courted no publicity, and never played the martyr or "good example." One might wonder, given the course of his life, if in fact he discovered his true calling, even his true joy, through his service in East London. In any case, the trajectory of his years at Toynbee Hall sketched a vision of human life that contrasted sharply with the pursuit of fame and power either as a politician or as a redeemed saint. Repentance can be quite countercultural that way.

Some of the best models of repentance can be found in fiction, which does not mean that they are untrue. One of the greatest novels of the twentieth century is Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*, a story that is almost exclusively about repentance, a very reluctant, angry, and finally life-giving repentance. The novel begins with an epigram by Leon Bloy: "Man has places in his heart which do not yet exist, and into them enters suffering in order that they may have existence."⁶ The suffering that enters Maurice Bendrix's life is the incipient faith of his lover, Sarah Miles, who in a moment of fear and terror caused by a bomb falling near his flat in London during World War II, begins to pray to God to spare her lover's life. His life is spared, and Sarah takes this gift as an answer to her prayer. She begins to struggle with her own faith, to pray, and to bring an end to the affair. Bendrix thinks she has left him for another, which she has, but not in the way he thinks. Eventually he comes to understand that Sarah believes and is attempting to live out in some measure a life of faithfulness to God. Bendrix, who would be quite comfortable in Achilles' world, comes to hate God for taking Sarah from him, even calling the story he is telling "a record of hate far more than love." But such hatred is dangerous, because it draws him closer and

closer through the strange alchemy of grace to the God in whom he is struggling not to believe. To be sure, Bendrix is no saint and his reluctant journey is filled with anger and pain, but by the end of the novel, he recognizes that some part of him will have to die if he is ever to learn to love. How that will work itself out is not told in detail, but in the last scene of the novel, after he has moved in to help Sarah's husband Henry, whom he formerly despised, to deal with her death, he confesses that his own hate "was as petty as my love." One night when he can't sleep, he looks in on Henry: "He was just a man—one of us. He was like the first enemy soldier a man encounters on a battlefield, dead and indistinguishable, not a White or a Red, but just a human being like himself. I put two biscuits by his bed in case he woke and turned the light out."⁷ Bendrix has discovered a humanity that is able to be kind.

The fictional account of repentance offers remarkable witness to the strange way that repentance comes as a gift, even an unwanted gift, from God, a gift, however, that has the power to make us more human. That is what happens here: the suffering, the anger, the reluctant repentance enables Bendrix, and in a way, Sarah too, to become human beings. That is the gift into which the God of grace draws sinners and liberates them from the confines of Achilles's shield.

The final model of repentance I would offer is not really a model at all, at least not in the sense that we might easily imitate it, but is in fact the whole basis of our repentance: the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, the one who bears our griefs and carries our sorrows, the one who, according to Hebrews, is our "high priest" who is able "to sympathize with our weakness," having been tested as we are, even Jesus Christ (Heb.4:14ff.). He has already repented for us, and "for our sake" he who knew no sin "became sin for us" (II Cor.5:21). And his repentance is what makes space for ours, what enables us, in Calvin's words, "to participate" in him. Only Christians can sin, according to Barth, for it is the very faithfulness of the God of Jesus Christ that reveals how often and how far and how deep we fail to follow, all of which makes of repentance a constant companion, and a not unwelcome one on our earthly pilgrimage. Even in our repentance, we are not alone. Christ has gone ahead of us and beckons us to follow.

In a funeral sermon delivered by Ralph Wood on the occasion of a friend's suicide, he had this to say:

The central truth of the gospel is that repentance is the sign of faith. We would not repent unless we were already under the pressure of God's salvation. What salvation means, I have come to believe, is God grasps us even when we can no longer grasp him, latching onto us even in the depths of our own personal hells. Thus we are right to hope... "that neither height nor depth, that neither principalities nor powers, that neither things present nor things to come, that neither life nor death, not even death by our own hand, can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."⁸

Far from being some craven plea, sincere or not, for God's favor, repentance is the robust claim that Jesus is Lord even over my sinfulness. My task is to deal with the hardness and gift of God's mercy. Here is no "struggle session," no "show trial,"

no “re-education camp.” Rather, here is that grace that enables us to bear with the mercy of God. That is where the strange democracy of forgiveness leaves us: “with the free confession of our sins.”⁹

Notes

1. W.H. Auden, “The Shield of Achilles,” in *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 598.
2. Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 41.
3. *Ibid.* 43.
4. Cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, IV/1*, pp.358 ff.
5. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bk.III, iii, 9.
6. Graham Greene, *The End of the Affair* (New York, Penguin Books, 1975), 6.
7. *Ibid.* pp. 182,183.
8. Ralph Wood, “A Grotesque Act of Repentance,” in *Preaching and Professing* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 257.
9. W.H. Auden, “New Year Letter,” in *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 241.