

May 30, 2010
Grove Presbyterian Church
Zechariah 3: 1-10
Matthew 18: 6-7

It takes a big man to know when to grovel. Great men and women acknowledge fault rather roll out the litany of excuses. The great know a sincere apology is a sign of strength, not weakness. For they try to fix what they can. They're the A students. The rest of us? We're C and D students.

Nations too.

The mistaken, foolish, and forgetful treat Memorial Day as a festive occasion. Those who remember honor those whom we remember: those who found something and someone worth dying for; those who nobly suffered the prideful sin of those who pressed their distorted sense good over the Goodness of a Just God.

Here is America's greatness. The freedom for self-examination, the guts to own up to truth and shoulder the judgment of history.

Abraham Lincoln defines Memorial Day best.

Without excuses, without fake or hollow apologies, he shouldered the blame, the burden, the responsibility. I quote from the proclamation of March 1863. This from a President who never joined a church nor was ever baptized.

*"We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving **grace**, too proud to pray to the God that made us! It behooves us then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness."*

Monday, we gather in humble respect to say, 'Thank you.'
Monday, we gather to say, "We are so very sorry." Monday,
we gather to resolve, "We cannot make the past right, but
we can become better; in your memory we promise to make it
better."

Listen: Matthew 18: 6-7

I have been to the mountaintop. I have been the Holy of
Holies. I have been to Graceland. Elvis's Graceland to be
exact. Memphis, Tennessee. Saw the Jungle Room. Toured
the TV Room. Got near the bathroom where the king ending
up killing himself at the age of 42 from an overdose of
prescription drugs. That's not alright, mama.

Elvis sure could sing those gospel tunes, but I wish he
knew them better. Maybe once upon a time he did, but after
years of him being exploited even gospels can turn into
just songs to fill up an album to turn a buck.

I finished my pilgrimage at the Meditation Garden. At the
head of Elvis's grave sits an eternal light carved in the
shape of a marble cube. My medical friend touring with me
pointed out, loudly, the second name of the list of donors
etched into the eternal light. It was the name of the
physician who wrote Elvis' prescriptions.

It is very sad Elvis himself did not find enough grace at
Graceland. But then Graceland's not really a place, is
it?

*And when [confession] happens among us Christians, God will
be able to work among the lost in new power and we shall
see a new work of grace there.*

-- Calvary Road

Yet our capacity to self-justify knows no bounds. Either
individually or as nations. Ask North Korea. Ask Tiger.
Ask Louisiana. Sure the gulf oil spill is horrible. Sure
it should never have happened. Sure Louisiana is angry.
But they weren't complaining years ago about their revenues
from all those off-shore drilling rigs.

Or ask yourself. My pride. My stubborn will. My
rationales. My excuses. My fears. My defensiveness. My

distrust. My whining. My proclivity for self-pity. My sense of good. My self. Well, ex-cuse me!

We're all going to get a spanking one way or another.

We mostly know Gulliver's Travels by the story of Gulliver among all those miniature Lilliputians. But after Gulliver escapes them, he is abandoned on an island where he is tiny and the people of Brobdingnag gigantic. Forced to see them up close, Gulliver can't stand the sight of them; their skin, beneath layers of cosmetics, is, up close, pocked-marked, filthy, blemished, offensive, stinky.

When you is stark naked, exposed, mirrors are uncomfortable work.

God, of course, has a nasty habit of requiring honesty. Only then can our stubborn, clamped down, iron-gated souls be pried open to receive God's work of grace.

When we pray our confessing prayer we do so at the beginning of Sunday worship for a very good reason. Who will get better if dishonest?

Tough to reflect the divine light when the mirror is smudged. Tough to hear the Word of God when you're busy listening to yourself. Or busy listening to others. Or busy gossiping about others. I'm so special. What a good boy am I. The world revolves around me. Not my fault. Not at all. Blame the world. Blame her. Blame him. Blame them. Blame bad luck.

Oh dear, my wax wings are melting.

Confession is the God-given remedy for self-deception and self-indulgence

--Dietrich Bonhoeffer, (Cost of Discipleship, p. 325).

One of the advantages of those clever with words is how the clever can offer an apology without an ounce of sincerity in it. Not that those clever ones have many reasons to be sorry about something they've said or done. It's others who cause offense.

But, God love us, sometimes some persons take offense and think they are owed an apology.

So, how can you say you're sorry without really meaning it?

The Deflection Apology:

Gee, I'm sorry you took offense...
I'm sorry you feel that way...

The Coy Apology:

Hey, don't be so sensitive, I'm joking...

The Scoffing Apology:

Don't be so stupid...

The "It's Your Fault" Apology:

I'm sorry I hurt you, but, you know, you shouldn't have said what you said...

The "I'm Bringing You Down with Me" Apology:

I apologize for what I did, but you also need to apologize to me...

The "I Have an Excuse" Apology:

I'm sorry, but (fill in the blank: I drank too much, I was angry, I was tired...)

The 'Pontius Pilate I Wash My Hands' Apology

I'm sorry for all the suffering they are experiencing (rather than admitting I am sorry for inflicting the suffering)...

The Bureaucratic Apology:

Darn. Mistakes have been made...

The Half-Hearted Apology:

I'm sorry (but - whisper, whisper -- don't expect me to change or do anything to make it better or make any effort whatsoever to correct the wrong)...

*The Blood of Jesus does not cleanse excuses, but always
cleanses sin, confessed as sin.*
-- **Calvary Road**

And the filthy clothes of Joshua the High Priest must be stripped off before he can stand before the presence of God. The angel doesn't even want to touch those disgusting garments, so the attendants strip Joshua naked. Joshua didn't even know how dirty he was. He needed to see what he was wearing.

So paints this dramatic vision revealed to the prophet Zechariah.

The exiles have returned from captivity in Babylon to rebuild Jerusalem, to rebuild the temple. They have a chance to correct the past and re-create their future.

But Joshua, as servant-priest-mediator between God and the people, bore the iniquity of his nation - so these filthy clothes symbolize.

Bringing wrongdoing into the light. But if I bring my wrong to God, does that mean I still have to tell everyone else?

Joshua must be stripped before he can be re-clothed in robes befitting his office. Clothes fit for the occasion. This won't be T-shirts and pink shorts announcing to those behind saying "Juicy" or "Angel" or "Princess," especially if you're older than 45. This won't be baggy jeans hanging low down so everyone can appreciate your choice in boxers. Save those for Wal-Mart. No Hawaiian shirts either. Sorry. Save those for the patio.

Saying you're sorry only begins the change.

You can't even launder or mend the filthy clothes. They have to be replaced by the beautiful clothes of grace God brings out from the closet and brings to you.

There's something and someone worth living for.