

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Old Broad Street Church on August 16, 2009
Lessons: Isaiah 65:17-25 and Luke 6:12-21

THERE'S LIABLE TO BE CONFUSION

Sometimes to spot the flaw in what has long been routine, we need to imagine a parallel situation but make it absurd. Then we can see where the long-accepted does not make as much sense as we may have assumed because we did not question it. So, imagine going to a medical doctor who always made the same diagnosis, then prescribed the same treatment, no matter what your symptoms. Sore throat with headache or gastric distress, rash with itching or fever with body aches, even a nose bleed that won't stop – every set of symptoms yields the same diagnosis and treatment. Obviously, you would not stay with that physician because it makes no sense for all medical problems to be labeled and treated the same way. How would such a doctor even stay in practice? By definition, diagnosis differentiates one condition from another so that treatment can fit the patient's actual problem or set of problems. Right?

Why, then, has Christianity persisted in treating spiritual distresses as though they were all the same condition of guilt caused by sin, in the narrow sense of things we have done but should not have, or things we have not done but should have.¹ When I feel guilty about something I have done, the church calls my fault a sin of commission – I committed the wrong. When I feel guilty about something I have neglected to do, the church calls my failing a sin of omission – I have omitted the right that was my responsibility or the good for which I had opportunity. It's pretty easy, of course, to see how people who are looking for guilt can always find something to feel guilty about. Even when I haven't had time to do anything very wrong, I can always think of things I should have done but did not. Guilt comes very easily to the practiced Christian.

But is guilt the only spiritual distress we feel? Is sin defined so narrowly in terms of guilt our only problem in need of God's grace, the only human condition that cries out for healing even as it, perhaps, resists treatment?

As one theologian I find very helpful in our so-called modern or postmodern times has observed, guilt is no longer the most common spiritual distress. Douglas John Hall points, rather, to the loss of hope, purpose, and direction among young adults especially but not only, and the current recession has worsened the situation, turning frustration and depression into a pandemic of the spirit.² People by the millions are living at some level of depression, not

because they feel guilty about something they have done or failed to do (a moral failure), but because their efforts at life have been thwarted, their preparations rendered fruitless, and their prospects dried up.³ The more common cry of the spirit to the heavens, voiced or unvoiced, is not, “What have I done?” but, “Why should I let myself care about doing anything?” What does it matter? Why put myself through another round of hope and effort only to be disappointed and humiliated? “Oh, you have a college degree, and what are you doing these days?” or “Oh, you don’t have a degree.” “Have you found a job yet?” “Well, maybe you should try something else.” *Excuse me, I set my sights and maybe my heart on doing something that mattered to me, something I believed worthwhile, something I’m actually good at, and where has it gotten me? Now, you want me to spend time and money for something my heart is not in, something that does not matter to me at all, something I’m not good at, or maybe it doesn’t even matter if I’m good at it or not? Why bother?*

It is not good enough to tell people whose hopes have been put on hold that they need to do something to earn money to survive. They know that. But hope deferred, dreams cut short, efforts unrewarded, produce a depression that is now pervasive in our society, and that depression drains life of its vitality, its energy, and its resolve. This reaction is not a weakness but a natural and real human condition that I suspect, ironically, is stronger in people who have cared more, worked harder, and invested more of themselves in planning and striving. The bigger the hope, the harder the fall. It is not the lazy who are newly depressed, but the diligent.⁴

Now, let’s put what is happening to bright, vital young people into historic social context in our land. It’s been happening since the Civil War to bright, vital young people with dark skin. The Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes wrote this:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

*Or does it explode?*⁵

That poem, sometimes called “Harlem,” is famous, but Hughes wrote a follow-up poem, less known, titled, “Same in Blues,” which concludes this way:

*There’s liable
to be confusion
in a dream deferred.*

From river to river,
Uptown and down,
There’s liable to be confusion
when a dream gets kicked around.⁶

It seems that what disillusionment with modern optimism has laid upon our younger generations, what the current recession has brought uptown, downtown, and across our land, is the confusion and depression that come when hopes get kicked around and dreams deferred.

The Bible does not accept the single-diagnosis theory. Guilt is not the only spiritual problem we have. Ever since the time of Israel’s slavery in Egypt, God has come into human history as the Redeemer of people whose dreams have been knocked down, kicked around, and mocked by various forms of enslavement. Shame brings confusion. If you are embarrassed, you experience some temporary confusion before you can get your bearings again. For at least a moment, you fumble, maybe mutter something, and then recover. That’s why people suddenly humiliated often berate themselves later because at the moment they couldn’t think of what to say in their own defense. When, however, humiliation becomes the constant condition of life, confusion becomes life’s normal state. The Bible’s book of Exodus tells us the enslaved Israelites were too disheartened to listen to the words of promise Moses spoke to them for God, and the Bible tells us so without blaming the people too beaten down to hope.⁷ The message of the gospel is that the Son of God became one of us and got his dreams and himself kicked around.

There is not just one distress in the human condition but many. Older adults mourn their losses in life and struggle against declining strength. All ages of children have their fears, anxieties, and disappointments, as do adults of all ages. Life brings a variety of problems, and, besides, distress is not the only reason to seek the grace of God in a community that encourages trust in God’s love. Christ calls us to growth, service, and ministry in many ways. So, as his church, we need to stop talking at people with our single diagnosis of guilt. We need to start listening.

We need to hear Jesus when he blesses the poor but warns the rich, when he speaks respectfully to the humiliated and challenges the proud. We need to listen to people in this society and around the world and take to heart their challenges to some of our cherished virtues and verities. We need to meet our society's children where they are, instead of just testing them to pick the supposedly best for success.

Real guilt, heartfelt guilt, is painful and crushing, but routinely presumed guilt is just as routinely and easily dismissed, as though confession could be made without remorse and forgiveness dispensed automatically. We need to be much more faithful to Jesus Christ in meeting people where they are, not with prescribed solutions and salvation formulas, but with shared hope and encouragement to trust. The church is not dead but more like struggling to be reborn. Those of us who care need to join in that struggle with open minds, open eyes and ears, open hands and hearts. Salvation is as broad and deep as life itself, and God's vision of it includes freedom from all that hurts and destroys, all that diminishes life or turns us against each other. I believe Christ is calling us to rediscover and serve that broader vision of salvation for this world and its people. Amen.

Notes:

1. Sin is really a much more inclusive concept than guilt can define. Sin is alienation from God, other people, the rest of God's created order (the natural world), and one's rightful self; but most people associate sin with blame and, therefore, with guilt.
2. Douglas John Hall, in various places in his writings; see the introduction to *Thinking the Faith*, volume one of his *Theology in a North American Context*.
3. See Donald L. Nathanson, *Shame and Pride: Affect, Sex, and the Birth of the Self*, particularly his discussion of typical depression (guilt-loaded) and atypical depression (shame-loaded) with the suggestion that the "atypical" is much more common than previously realized, pp. 147, 148.
4. For a description and explanation of our responses to the triggering of the shame affect, including the temporary confusion, see Nathanson, *Shame and Pride*, particularly the section specifically devoted to the shame affect, "Shame-Humiliation," pp. 134-149.
5. Langston Hughes, "Harlem," in the anthology, *Black Voices*, Abraham Chapman, editor, pp. 430, 431.
6. Hughes, "Same in Blues," *Black Voices*, pp. 432, 432.
7. See Exodus chapter 5 and 6:1-9, and specifically the statement in 6:9.