

“Penitence Is Needed”
Isaiah 58:1–12; Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21
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At last month’s deacons meeting, John Shell asked what was needed from the deacons at the upcoming Ash Wednesday Service. I replied, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, “Penitence.” The deacons laughed. John was asking about logistical roles as deacons help with the celebration of communion and the collection of offerings, and Kimberly Taylor and I remembered that deacons were asked to serve as greeters for special services this year. But the ministers have imposed ashes in the past and we don’t need help, though that may be up for debate. My technique has been the subject of some critique by my colleagues. They don’t seem to appreciate a Picaso-esque approach to drawing a cross...

Anyway, I was speaking tongue-in-cheek, but I could have been serious. Penitence is needed from deacons as spiritual leaders, and ministers, indeed, the whole church. Penitence is what Ash Wednesday is about, it’s what Lent is about. This is a season of reflection and self-examination. The point is not to beat ourselves up emotionally and spiritually, we are all beloved children of God, but we all have room to grow, in the context of grace. Doing so requires a willingness to acknowledge our frailty and need. That is the focus of this season.

On one level, it is an intensely personal endeavor, which is good news, we don’t want to go about this work in public. The words from the Sermon on the Mount about giving alms, praying, and fasting in a private way underscore this focus. Jesus says genuine acts of spiritual discipline are not done for show. They are personal matters between us and God. It’s not that no public prayer is appropriate, though some interpret the teaching this way, but care ought to be exercised whenever faith is expressed before others to make sure it is not self-serving.

I think of the old story about the rabbi bowing down at the altar and crying out, “O God, I am nothing, I am nothing!” Not to be outdone in piety,

the president of the synagogue moved to the altar and bowed down, saying, “O God, I am nothing, I am nothing!” Then, a man few people recognized walked from the back of the sanctuary to the altar, bowed down, and said, “O God, I am nothing, I am nothing!” at which point, the president of the synagogue cut his eyes at the rabbi and said, “Would you look at who thinks he is nothing!”

Public acts of piety can be suspect. Genuine spiritual discipline is personal and private. This is true of penitence, thank goodness for us all, for this helps us to be willing to examine our lives more carefully.

It also helps us to realize that our penitence is practiced in the context of grace. Naming our flaws is not part of a plan to earn God’s favor. We are embraced in love by a gracious God, just as we are. There is nothing we can do to make God love us more and there is nothing we can do to make God love us less. We seek to grow in response to grace.

I have used a metaphor in personnel reviews to lessen anxiety. When we talk about an area of improvement, we are talking about whether we prefer peas or asparagus with a meal, not if we want a divorce. It is easier to hear feedback that might benefit our work when we know we are affirmed. Similarly, it is easier to examine our lives in search of something better when we know God loves us as we are.

So, it’s helpful to know this is personal and private work, and to realize it takes place in the context of grace. It’s also helpful to see that the process involves moving away from some things *and* toward others.

When we hear words like penitence, we think first of subtraction. We need to do away with bad habits. The list in my adolescence was “sex, drugs, and rock and roll,” though the list is ever evolving. I’m reading Gordon S. Wood’s book *Friends Divided: John Adams and Thomas Jefferson* in which these founders of our nation were advised in young adulthood to avoid the great temptations of women, tobacco, and card playing (surely something other than “Go Fish”). They each took the counsel like most young adults... not completely to heart.

There are habits that cheapen our lives and distance us from God, though some perspectives on piety are narrow. Jesus and his disciples would not be welcome in some Baptist churches, winebibbers that they were. But in the realm of subtraction, what may merit consideration is our tendency to hold on

to anger, our obsession with sports, our leaning toward perfectionism, our willingness to demonize others. There are many things that can limit us and distance us from God.

But penitence isn't just about removing unworthy things; it's about taking on worthy things. It's not just about subtraction but addition too. What new habits might benefit us? Perhaps a new focus in devotional time. I vary my routine because I get stuck in mechanical processes, not because they are contrary to my nature, but because they are intrinsic to it. I structure everything carefully. Sometimes I need more freedom.

Or perhaps we might benefit from a new avenue of service or a return to an old one. A seminary professor's answer to a graduate's question about how to grow after leaving seminary was, "You need to go to the ghetto and serve the poor so as to redistribute your blood, too much of which has been concentrated in your brain, throughout your body." Doing something for others helps us in many ways. We focus less on ourselves, offer practical help, and see Christ in others.

We have many opportunities in this church to follow such a path — the clothing ministry, food truck, White Flag ministry, and the list goes on and on. But we might also invest time with family and friends — a caregiver who needs a break, a church member who needs someone to talk to, a neighbor who needs assistance. There are many ways to grow.

And yet, while examining our lives on a personal level is part of our charge, penitence is also a corporate challenge for the church and nation. In the reading from Isaiah, God sends a message to all Israel. It is a call to national repentance. As in other places in prophetic literature, the people are told that pious practices like fasting don't mean a thing to God. The act of spiritual devotion God desires is that they loose the bonds of injustice, let the oppressed go free, share bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into their houses. If they do these things, they will be like a watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.

The calling is to a life of justice, treating the poor and vulnerable with compassion, and it is to be lived out not just on a personal level but on a national level. Lest we think this is simply a Hebrew concern, there are echoes of social responsibility throughout Jesus' teaching, though many

contemporary Christians edit them out, but God’s concern extends to the whole world, not just individual conscience. Thus, so must ours.

So, where might we be falling short? What aspects of our shared life in this community and nation call for penitence? I doubt anyone would deny our need, though there are different opinions about what is displeasing to our Maker. But keeping in mind the biblical standards of justice and concern for the poor, there are some clear areas of concern.

In a land of unprecedented wealth, how do we have this much poverty? In a time of unprecedented global migration, how do we talk so much about secure borders and extend so little compassion? In an age of so many technological advances, how do we remain ethically and spiritually bankrupt? In a nation birthed on principles of political and religious liberty, why are we willing to trade it all for bowl of porridge?

In part, because we divide the world into categories of “us” and “them” and conclude that “they” don’t matter as much, and in part because we embrace the distinctly American myth of individualism. Social problems are not the result of individual choice alone nor can they be solved solely at an individual level. Furthermore, the wellbeing of any person is inextricably linked to the wellbeing of others.

Celeste Kennel-Shank illustrates these truths in an article in *The Christian Century* (March 2025, p. 25) as she reflects on the ashes of a friend who was like a sister to her growing up. The woman died after two decades of opioid addiction. Celeste called an ambulance for her on one occasion, but they become estranged, and the friend died. The opioid crisis is something that might unite people, she thought, as it transcends rural and urban categories, income differences and racial distinctions. But it hasn’t, she continued, because there are communities where the crisis flourishes more, and we judge *them* for *their* problem.

Yet we are all part of the brokenness, she says, whether we have addictions or not, we are all affected by the brokenness and thus need healing, and we will never be well until all are well.

So it goes with social ills whether we are talking about addiction or poverty or anything else. Isaiah and Jesus call us to acts of penitence, an acknowledgment of our personal and social ills, and a commitment to alter our path in the light of God’s grace.