

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
Dr. Jay Howell
February 16, 2020

“Apologies: Other People’s Sins”
Ezra 9:1-9

We are in week three of our February sermon series “Apologies,” this four-week look at how we could or should give an account for faith. One verse that we’ve referenced each week is 1 Peter 3:15: “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.” You’ll remember that that word “defense,” as in “make your defense” in Greek is the word *apologia*, the same word we get the word “apology” from, but in older usage, an “apology” didn’t mean saying you’re sorry; it meant to give an account or to make a defense. That’s why the series is called “Apologies.” How do we give an account for faith in the face of skepticism or hostility?

This week we ask, what if we find ourselves in a place in which our apology, our account for faith, needs to be actually apologizing? What if there are times when our best account for faith, our best witness, is in fact saying we’re sorry? Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Two years ago, while we were still in Memphis, the whole city it seemed was rallying to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King. A somber time in the city, really. Lots of services throughout the Spring of 2018, and encouragingly they were being led by a mix of leaders in the city, civic and religious, black and white. Among them were the pastors of two Presbyterian churches in Memphis, Second Presbyterian Church and Independent Presbyterian Church. Those two congregations today are large, traditional Presbyterian churches, and if you’re ever looking for examples of large, traditional Presbyterian churches that are energized by passion for mission and engagement in their city, those two congregations wouldn’t be the worst place to start. More specifically, they’re also on the forefront of conversations about racial reconciliation.

So, when the pastors of these two churches took part in the various events commemorating the anniversary of King’s death, you might think they’d have some cause to celebrate some of the progress that has been made, maybe even some good things they themselves had had a hand in. But they didn’t. At least that wasn’t their main point.

Instead, the focus of any of their remarks was repentance: public, corporate repentance. And this is why.

In the 1960s, Second Presbyterian Church in Memphis was a segregated congregation. It was a white church, and it didn’t allow black members. Its position became the subject of a lot of local and national attention in the mid-1960s, and what started to happen was a series of attempted so-called “kneel-ins,” peaceful demonstrations to attend the worship services at Second to integrate a segregated church. The Session did not permit them, and in one indicting picture, there’s a small group of these activists kneeling in prayer on the sidewalk in front of the sanctuary, with all the elders up the steps to the sanctuary, looking down on them, physically barring the doors.

The confrontation started to get press both locally and nationally, and pressure started to mount. Disagreement grew within the church itself, and eventually, Second Presbyterian reversed the position, desegregated, and allowed the activists to worship in their pews, with the first black members being welcomed in the spring of 1965.

However, not everyone was happy with that decision. In fact, a sizable portion of the congregation left in protest and started another Presbyterian congregation that would retain their whites-only policy. That new congregation was the birth of Independent Presbyterian Church.

So fast forward fifty years to the pastors of Second Presbyterian and Independent Presbyterian speaking at events commemorating Martin Luther King, their remarks were words of repentance, public repentance for the actions and stances taken by their churches fifty years earlier. It was right and good that they did so, in my opinion, and their remarks were well received. But at the same time, you would start to hear whispers, just whispers, coming from some members of those congregations. Universally these members would denounce the discriminatory actions taken years ago, but there were also hints of people wondering, "How long are we going to have to apologize for things we ourselves didn't do?"

Now I don't bring up that history to knock Second Presbyterian or Independent Presbyterian. Far from it. Those are congregations that I admire in many ways. But their history, speaks to the particular challenge that faces the church when we are asked to give an account for the church's past failings. To what degree should we hold ourselves responsible for and seek forgiveness for how the church has fallen short? That's a hard question.

It's a similar situation that faced the Israelite priest Ezra many years ago. This all takes place as the Jews are allowed to return from exile to their homeland. But they don't all come at once. It comes in waves over decades. The Book of Ezra is all about how these Jews returned from exile and tried to establish a new society that's faithful to God and his word.

The priest Ezra only shows up for the last third of the book. He comes to the promised land in one of the later waves of returning Jews, and as a priest, he quickly steps into a role of spiritual leadership, but it's important to remember that he comes back to Jerusalem to a society that had already been trying to figure things for a few decades already. And it's at that point that he learns some troubling news.

Starting in v. 1 of chapter 9: "After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, 'The people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the [you get the picture].... For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons. Thus, the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands, and in this faithlessness the officials and leaders have led the way.'"

The central issue here was that the people of Israel and their leaders were breaking God's law and intermarrying with all the other peoples that were in the surrounding land. Important thing to note, just because this text and others like it have been used to justify segregation: when the Old Testament law speaks against intermarrying with other peoples, the concern is a religious one, not an ethnic one. This is why. Inevitably, when a people, especially one as fragile as the people of Israel, begins to intermarry with other nations, they start taking on the religious practices of those other nations. Wives and husbands bring their own gods and practices, and it corrupts the purity of Israel as a covenant people before God.

That's what Ezra has walked into. But while you would think his first response would be condemning all the people who were doing this, pointing a finger at everyone, instead he does something different. He tears his garment, pulls hair from his head, fasts from food and drink,

falls down on his knees, spreads his hands out to God. He mourns and confesses, starting in v. 6, “O my God, I am too ashamed and embarrassed to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens.”

Here’s the thing. Ezra hasn’t done anything wrong. He didn’t intermarry. He wasn’t even around when it was happening—he just got there. But he mourns and confesses that sin anyway. And if that wasn’t enough, he rolls in all the sins of their ancestors into it, again, things that he didn’t himself do.

It begs the same question that some of the Presbyterians in Memphis were whispering: “How long do we have to apologize for things we didn’t do?”

Because I’ll be honest with you. I don’t like doing that. Do you? I don’t like doing that.

I don’t like the notion of taking the blame or taking the fall or catching the flak because someone else past or present did something wrong. I mean, that goes against every instinct I have for fairness and justice. If you did something wrong, you pay the consequences for it. Don’t expect me to apologize for you, much less confess it as I was actually the one who did it. I mean, the most you could expect is either a vague “I’m sorry that happened,” or a fake apology like the Houston Astros gave this past week after they got busted for sign-stealing.

But that doesn’t sound anything like what Ezra is doing here. Ezra’s talking about legit confession and contrition for something he wasn’t responsible for. So, am I thinking about it all wrong? It’s like there’s some block there for me.

But then again, it’s like there’s always something blocked when a wrong hasn’t been acknowledged in some way.

When we were talking about this sermon last Fall, Mark shared about one odd and I’m sure unsettling encounter with one of their neighbors. They found out that this neighbor, someone they had lived next to for years, had been keeping a list of all the ways, in the neighbor’s view at least, that Mark and Karen had wronged them. And Mark shared that he was taken aback when he learned that the neighbor a) hadn’t said anything for years, and b) actually kept a list. Now for me, I just assume our neighbors are keeping a list, but then they have good reason to, but for this neighbor, obviously there were wrongs that, from their point of view, had never been addressed. So, no matter whether these perceived slights were reasonable or not, and my guess is kind of that they weren’t, and even though Mark had no earthly idea that this list existed, how receptive do you think this neighbor would have been to Mark sharing about faith? When a wrong goes unacknowledged, it’s like there’s a block to listening to anything else.

Mark shared another story from a missionary we’ve supported named Christy Rice. Christy was serving in Africa but had recognized in her mission field that her church had done wrong, and it had affected in particular a group of men in the community. So one time, she went to this group of men, acknowledged how the church had failed them, and you know what happened? They did the same back to her. The block wasn’t there anymore, or at least it was being cleared away.

Clearing the way is a good way to think about apologies, and by that I mean both the old sense of the word, of giving an account, and the modern, regular sense of the word, of expressing regret. One definition of apologetics, that field of evangelism about addressing challenges to faith, is that it’s clearing the underbrush from someone’s mind so that faith may advance, because whether we care to admit it or not, we remember past wrongs, we have hold ups, and if they’re not addressed in some way, we’re not going to think of anything else. For example, if I had forgotten about Valentine’s Day, let’s just say, do you think Frances would’ve been okay

with my just saying, “It happened. We need to put this behind us and just move forward”? Would that have been the end of it? No way.

It’s similar for the church. When the church has fallen short and doesn’t own up to it, it doesn’t matter how slick a ministry there might be. No one’s going to listen. There’s something blocked that has to be cleared away.

And it’s more than just a tool for evangelism, much more. It’s a statement of care and concern. Today, we’re joining with other neighborhood churches in the Love Your Neighbor initiative, headed up by our friends at First United Methodist, and the purpose is straightforward: that this Sunday we would join in a message about care for our community, about loving our neighbor. There are lots of ways to demonstrate love to one’s neighbor, but as far as the church’s witness for Christ within a community, do you think the neighbors would listen if the church hasn’t owned up to its failings? Would you?

And so too often the church reaches an impasse, especially when the perceived wrongs were done long ago or by other people. So how do we get to the place where Ezra is, readily embracing and confessing the sins of his people, even though he had nothing to do with them?

As it turns out, he tells us. In v. 8, Ezra prays, “But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the Lord our God, who has left us a remnant, and given us a stake in his holy place, in order that he may brighten our eyes and grant us a little sustenance in our slavery.” What is motivating Ezra isn’t a desire to confess or some savvy psychological move. He sees before him the Lord being gracious and forgiving to him and his people who had turned from the Lord long ago. He sees a sign of grace, of the Lord bringing them back, back to the land, back into his presence, and in light of that grace, in light of that redemption, nothing else matters.

It is the same with us. The more we set before us not questions of who’s to blame or how much we’re to blame or how effective an evangelism tool apologizing can be but instead the reality of the grace of Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we are forgiven and redeemed, the more eager we become to own up to our failings, individually and as a church.

Now, precisely what wrongs there are to acknowledge, that’s a touchy subject, because it seems everyone has a different sense of what the past and present moral failings of the church are. There are some common ones like past complicity in slavery and systemic racism, cover ups of sexual abuse and misconduct, just to name a couple. But more broadly, we must have the grace of the Lord firmly in our sights and in our hearts if we are to bear this witness of repentance, of apology, in our homes, our workplaces, our schools, our neighborhoods. Nothing else will get us there.

So we must ask. What new things have we embraced too readily that we will one day need to recant and repent of? What old things have we clinged to, resisting the Spirit’s guidance, that we will one day need to let go of to walk the new path God sets before us? What has the church done or not done years ago that for the sake of our witness for Christ and a sharing of love for our neighbor we must ask forgiveness? In the same vein, what is the church saying today that will one day make our daughters and our sons hang their heads in shame? What is the church not saying today that will make our daughters and our sons one day repent for our silence?

These are questions that haunt me. Perhaps they should haunt all of us.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**