

PASTORAL PRAYER

Today, God, is the day. Today is the day for worship. Today is the day to turn from old sins and seek new life. Today is the day to seize the possibilities before us, great or small. Walk with us today, God, to feel convicted of the things that need to change. Open our ears, God, to the needs of the world around us. Guide our hands as we move them to be of loving service. Empower us, God, for the tasks ahead, and may we be open to the Spirit's calling wherever it presents itself. As we present ourselves to you, God, we present our prayers, those of well-being and guidance, and ask you hear what we say. Guide us, God.

We come to be your people today, Gracious God, to celebrate, to mourn, to remember. God, today, help us remember the sins of the past and to continually repent of our ongoing guilt in the sins of our forbearers. We may not have participated in their sins, but we continue to benefit from their wrongdoings. Help us to live with the mind of Christ Jesus, that we may live with humble minds, ears, and hearts that seek out and hears the cries of those sinned against. May our attitudes and lives be one of caring, heartfelt repentance toward the downtrodden and forgotten. We pray all these things in the name of the Lord of Justice and Compassion, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray as one, saying...

SERMON

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” This famous quote by George Santayana is just as relevant today as it was then. Not only is it philosophically accurate, it is practical. The way that we become fully who we are meant to be is to walk down a road that is filled with mistakes and to learn and grow from those mistakes. More importantly, we need to learn from the mistakes of our forbearers and make sure those sins are never repeated. If we do not remember, whether from our own

personal mistakes or from the larger mistakes of history, we will fall into the same old traps. We will be condemned to live the same mistakes again, and those can be disastrous. The consequences for us and for all of God's creation can literally last for generations.

Now that the summer is over, and we've all come back from our vacations, and we're getting into a fall groove, it's time to look back to and process the events of Annual Conference. Annual Conference is a great time to meet with fellow lay people, clergy, and our conference leadership. But this year, there was more. It was certainly a power-packed event, requiring time to process. We met in Pueblo, CO and spent a lot of time talking about the past. This past we remembered together is not something to be admired but mourned. Indeed, we remembered that famous quote from George Santayana, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it," and named the effects of a history forgotten while not letting it conquer us. That quote has so much meaning, for those who have sinned and those who have been sinned against. At Annual Conference, we remembered a particular sin, the sin of the Sand Creek Massacre, and sought to live repentantly in light of our role in that horrible tragedy so many years ago.

Last week, I shared from Philippians 2; I do so again this week. Last week, I preached on the significance of abuse in our public sphere and homes; this week, I talk about a different kind of abuse. This is the abuse of a great sin; that past is forgotten, swept up and hidden away by one group while another group remembers fully and still strains over the burden of that sin. That group is our Native American brothers and sisters. I don't think that we, who have no such history, can imagine the horrors of generations that have held the burden of justice forgotten. Let me tell you the story of the Sand Creek Massacre

and Methodism's unfortunate role in the killings, see how scripture responds to these types of sins, and move forward with ways to foster a heart full of repentance and caring.

The story of the Sand Creek Massacre has two main characters that show two viewpoints. First, there is Colonel John Chivington: a Methodist Minister and, you would think, a seemingly noble man of God in command of many troops. On the other side was Captain Silas Soule, a lower ranking commander in charge of a company of soldiers. On the night of November 28, 1864, Colonel Chivington led several companies, including Captain Soule's, from Fort Lyon in South Eastern Colorado to Sand Creek, not too far from present day Eads, CO. Sand Creek is where several Native American Tribes camped under a flag of truce. The Native Americans were there, by our definitions, lawfully; they were given this particular land to camp by the authorities at Fort Lyon. When the troops arrived, the Native Americans there expected them to be friendly, but they were not. They opened fire. They charged. They brutally attacked. This was not a camp full of warriors but civilians, those who could not defend themselves. What followed was six to eight hours of...there's no better word for it...massacre. Women, children, the elderly...no one was safe. Some got away, but the body count was incredibly high. Chivington watched with approval as the troops under his command took to his orders. And why? Why did this attack happen? He had no good defense, except his disgusting, superior joy at seeing Native peoples killed. But the situation was not completely without conscience. Only one company stayed in formation, refusing to participate: the company of Captain Soule. In fact, he witnessed to the atrocities by reporting the evil to higher authorities. As a part of our trip to the Sand Creek Massacre site, we read that letter by Soule. It is saddening and graphic beyond my ability to share. Afterwards, there was a trial; Soule testified against Chivington in military

court. Do you know what the outcome was? Nothing. Chivington was not held accountable by either the Methodist Church, by whom he was ordained, or the government. On the other hand, five months later, the newly married Captain Soule was serving in Denver when he was shot down. No one was accused of his murder; no witnesses could be found. I'm guessing that probably wasn't by accident. One man was the prophet here, and he suffered a sorry fate by choosing integrity. The other man committed heinous acts of slaughter, went unpunished, and remained unrepentant his whole life. Hundreds died without reason. This story is not forgotten by those still reeling from its effects.

We as Christian peoples decided not to forget it either. At Annual Conference, we all undertook what was called an "Act of Repentance" by understanding the events, our ongoing role, and traveling to the site of the Sand Creek Massacre. We did not do this alone. Alongside us were many of the survivor's descendants. As we traveled to the site, not far from Eads, CO, we heard their stories. History like that cannot just be forgotten by a family, no matter how many hundreds of years separate us. In fact, the gentleman speaking on my bus was a survivor's descendant and an ordained minister. This was not a tour, it was a pilgrimage; we respected the site as a holy place where innocents were killed without mercy or reason and we remembered our past role in those events. After this, we returned to Pueblo to dine together in celebration of our mutual care and respect for one another, having begun the process of repentance. I don't think this act of repentance can ever be finished, but then again, that is the heart of true repentance: it never ends.

Unfortunately, it was not an act with complete support. There were dissenting voices, for this message wasn't pleasing to hear. Those negative voices still resound: "This happened so long ago; why should we care?" "This wasn't our fault!" Indeed, it did happen

a very long time ago. It is not our specific fault, but we do hold the burden of a very guilty history. We cannot and should not forget that the Methodist Church up to this day silently stood by, perhaps even silently approved of it, as a man this church ordained as a man of God and of love led a ruthless attack that went unanswered and unaccounted for. We cannot and should not forget that we still benefit today from the many atrocities from that age. Native Americans have been brutally treated and lived under treachery by the government and its people. We live on land right now that was once promised to Native Peoples and was later taken away by force. The history is harsh, but we have the chance to bring forth the Gospel. Brutality to other human beings, no matter how different they are, can never be excused in the name of "progress" or, God forbid, in God's name. These are other children of God born in God's image and receiving God's blessing. This history is our history and their history, and it is bloody and beyond sinful. We cannot deny our role in it.

Then and today, we have a choice: we can remain in ignorance and self-righteousness or we can seek God's path, the path shown in Christ Jesus. If we do not repent of that history, by word and deed, then we also would be doomed to repeat it. That history is a history of disowning a past that is ours; that history is a history of self-satisfaction, being comfortable with the way things are. We can easily sweep sins under the rug...not our fault! We didn't do it! Our first scripture lesson responds to this directly. Ephesians says, "You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world...All of us once lived...in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses." Before we sought the way of the Gospel, we took the easy way out; we did what was self-pleasing. The easy thing to do is opt out, say that this whole matter is not our problem. But when we do that, we participate in the greater

sin. This is the sin of indifference and complacency, like last week. When we seek Christ, we seek a different way. “For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” Through Christ’s service, we turn from willful ignorance and seek good works of repentance. Following Christ means hearing the calling to care and respond to these needs, especially when the path is difficult.

We return to our passage from Philippians because there is so much here to feed us. The passage is complex, but the message is simple: we must live into Christ’s example. Christ’s example calls us to completion in love, in humility, in caring for others. We are called to be of the same humility, the humility that doesn’t tell others what they should be or feel but honors them as they are. Christ called people to completion by his love and care. I hope that we did when we took the long trip to Eads while hearing the struggles of families still reeling from the effects of that massacre. As Philippians 2:4 says, “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.” To look to our own interests here would be to wash our hands of the matter: move on with our lives not caring. After all, we didn’t do it, right? But we seek something better. So what can we do today?

The bottom line is that we cannot change the past; we have no intention of doing so. That’s not the point of the Acts of Repentance. In the present, we have to treat our Native American brothers and sisters better. There are still the subtle Old West stereotypes that Native Americans are aggressive and must be conquered. That’s just not true. It’s still pretty obvious today. Some don’t care about the NFL team, the Washington Redskins, but even that simple usage is a great insult. Would any of us go up to a Native American and call them a “Redskin?” If not, how can we say that this honors these members of God’s creation? We can’t. It starts in subtle ways, like many other sins. How would we feel if

someone decided to make a team that uses caricatures of Wyomingites in ways that we find insulting? We wouldn't stand for it, nor should we ignore these small ways of devaluing our Native brothers and sisters. But there is so much more to do. One of the holiest things that we can do is share our stories. I know many of you love to share about your families, about your life experiences, about the ways that we are proud of the work we do. You want to share them, and you want the person hearing your stories to show that they appreciate them too. It's courteous, and it is loving. It's the same case for the families we met. They told us how they carried the effects of this sin across the generations. We honored those stories by allowing them to share with us and respecting those stories. Although Annual Conference is done, there is still opportunity to hear the stories and honor them. We as the Conference are growing in our partnership, and there is a yearly honoring of the Sand Creek victims. The opportunity is never over to take one more step in this road of repentance by those of us who have forgotten but still benefit from our forbearers' sins.

The issues are complex. It's easy to keep things under the rug when the issues and stories have been there for decades. But we seek something better than the status quo. We seek Christ's way, a way of humility and honoring our neighbor wherever they are and whoever they may be. This is an opportunity for new life once again, for us, who do not realize the absolute burden of guilt we carry, and for the families of the survivors, who hold a pain that requires our apology and repentance from the sins of our forbearers and for the sins of complacency. This is a hard message, one that will take more consideration and study, but it is one that we cannot ignore. Indeed, the ongoing sin can be far more subtle than we realize sin can be. Thanks be to God for healing, for the opportunity to repent, and for the strength and courage to follow the difficult path. Amen and Amen.