

“Repentance and Accountability”
 Sermon for 27 September 2020
 Text: 2 Peter 1:16-21

I was working on a message based on Gen. 43 & 44 which deals with whether Joseph’s brothers genuinely repented but it kept growing, almost taking on a life of its own! My final draft reached eight pages and then I reached the point I always reach: what am I called to preach and why should I preach that message now. And the issue that surfaced focused on repentance (genuine, or not) and accountability. When Joseph tests his brothers to see **if you are honest men**—he is bringing them to accountably. He is searching to see if they have the self-awareness to repent and become changed individuals. Honest, rather than dishonest. We, too, need self-awareness and we, if we have it, are positioned to live a repentant life-style—*continual repenting* is the proper spiritual posture of Christians. If we are sober, humble and honest we will master the kind of balance necessary to navigate the rough waters Americans find themselves in these days. And that, these turbulent times, answers the urgency of preaching this message now, the why question.

Repentance, accountability and circumstances—they are all connected. Joseph, as a young man, had the reputation of being a tale-bearer, of spying on his brothers and then bringing back a **bad report to their father**. (Gen. 37:2) Talebearing and favoritism caused his brothers to resent Joseph and to hate both Joseph and Jacob. His older brothers were a wild, ill-disciplined bunch given to carousing, lewdness and licentiousness—at least that is what the bad report is taken to include. Whatever the misbehavior was, and the extremity of it, is what led to the bad report—the bad report did not create the behavior. The brothers resented being held accountable to anyone; they were lawless, I hope you can sense the contemporaneous feel to all this that I do. While there is no sin in the scriptures to which the heart of man is immune, reporting sin, or accountability does not cause sin. Plainly, if there was no misbehavior, there would be nothing to report, nothing to resent, and nothing to cover-up.

Circumstances, all of them, are made up of facts. The fact of the bad report is tied to the fact of misbehavior, is tied to Joseph’s actions and to his brothers’ reactions. God used this circumstance, as he does all circumstances, to push his plan forward—so, on the one hand we have everything that I have related so far (the misbehavior, the report/talebearing, resentment and hatred) and on the other hand, we have what God is up to in all of that. God was leading Joseph into a place of humiliation (deprivation, injustice, suffering and protracted loneliness), relocating him to Egypt, preparing Joseph for leadership ahead of a crisis so severe that the world’s population would be at risk. Joseph’s brothers do not know what God is up to—and, frankly, they do not even know what they are getting into(!). Their lack of self-awareness allowed their contempt for their father to mushroom into criminality (human trafficking, attempted murder, lies, dishonor, deceit and cruelty). Of course, it goes deeper than a lack of self-awareness—it ties into *our sinful nature* which leads us to do wicked and stupid things with relish and abandon (things like slaughtering all the men in a village, joining in pagan worship, treachery and immorality). It is sin that necessitates our divine rescue which offers forgiveness in exchange for repentance and belief. We can say with assurance, none of those considerations even crossed their devious minds. But these considerations must cross our minds—we know we are accountable for our sins and we know that repentance is the prescribed way out.

So, our country is aflame with protests—ostensibly over the shooting of Jacob Blake and the shooting death of Breonna Taylor. We are being told that these outrages are the result of “systemic racism” and “police brutality” in a toxic brew of “white supremacy.” These violence events are being forced to fit the narrative just mentioned when, in fact, they have a narrative of their own! How are we to respond to these incendiary charges? And that is some of what I have to pass on to you today. First of all, we take our biblical faith seriously enough to recognize a **cleverly devised myth** when we see one. People are being deceived, and forced to endorse this false narrative. It is a falsehood. That does not mean there has not been, or there is not presently racism—or police brutality because there demonstrably have been lamentable incidences of it. As Christians we are against both racism and brutality. As for “white supremacists,” they certainly do exist; but they do not drive the policing in America. There are also black supremacists, who are, I take it just as extreme, radical and unChristian as their “white” counterparts. We should all take a breath.

We do have “systemic crime” in this country—and that better fits what we see regarding Blake and Taylor. There is alleged sexual assault and drug trafficking involved respectively. Remember, if there were no misbehavior, there would be nothing to report—the police would not have been called to an incidence of domestic abuse, or assigned to serve a search warrant for illicit drugs. In the rush to judgment and the passion of public outrage, it is forgotten that the police were just doing their job. *The criminal element is responsible for the police having work to do.* Pointing out the obvious is necessary when emotion are high. Jacob’s sons are responsible for the bad report; it’s their behavior that prompted it. Now, I surely hope we are all praying about these matters. Let’s recall the precipitating causes and circumstances entailed—neither incident just came out of the blue.

Secondly we need to allow for the possibility that none of the parties involved are happy that things went down as they did—because it is true. The police don’t like shooting people, that’s pathological, and people don’t like being shot. In Breonna’s case, parties on both side of the door were exercising self-defense and the cost of self-defense is high: people get wounded, hurt and die. But the right to self-defense is unarguable and irrevocable; but there are consequences. Murder is not one of them. What Joseph’s brothers did to him was premeditated, attempted murder. It morphed to human trafficking when the brothers, not wanting to shed Joseph’s blood decided to make a profit off his enslavement. Joseph’s sale was not racially motivated and neither was the response to domestic violence, or the drug raid. While dealing with Jacob Blake’s incident, re-victimization of a woman (a warrant for felonious sexual assault) was uncovered and a potential kidnapping was averted (“He’s got my keys and my children.”) Jacob resisted arrest, was combative with police and armed with a knife (which he refused to drop) so the officer shot him in self-defense, neutralizing the threat in a legitimate use of force. Now, I am assuming all this detail is accurate, of course, but the tinder box of violent protest was set to go off and Kenosha was going up in flames. I do not believe that violence is an appropriate response to violence; it will not promote justice. Be that as it may, there is plenty of room for repentance all around—especially with Jacob. Breonna was collateral damage in an exchange of fire; it is not even certain that she was ever a target—yes, despite being shot multiple times. If she had not been involved in drugs, lawbreaking, the raid would not have happened and she would be alive today. There’s room for repentance there as well. The choice to open fire, even in self-defense, through a door is probably an awful thing to do. You might be killing a friend. But fear mitigates circumstances and the boyfriend had

credible fear. I am also certain that the wounded officer had credible fear as well. That is why homicide, not murder is an appropriate charge. Celebrities and stars pontificating on the findings of the grand jury are acting reprehensibly and they should *repent*, cease and desist. Just because you have fame, or prowess on the field, or court doesn't qualify you to judge these cases—it is ignorant and defamatory. Politicizing the whole business is just plain wrong. But ego, and an inflated sense of self-importance—something I think we call pride—compels some people to slander others.

It may be possible to call people out for their malfeasance. And it may not be. If, on an interpersonal level, we can persuade people to strive for more self-awareness that would be a good thing. If we can increase the level of patience among our neighbors that would also be a good thing. Remember, your speeding causes accidents. Texting while driving is potentially lethal; it is hardly accidental and any accident is not your I-phone's fault. It's yours. Drinking and driving can lead to harm, death and property damage and that's not accidental either. Shooting at police with the intent to kill is premeditated murder and it is not justified by a sense of outrage, vengeance, or any cause of social justice. We should know and affirm these things as often as possible because there are so many who don't seem to care and confuse recklessness with freedom, license with liberty. Christians know better than that.

There is a great hue and cry for justice these days. We must be wiser. There should be a greater hue and cry for mercy—but that is another topic. I want to suggest that perhaps justice is not attainable apart from righteous, responsible accountability. Perhaps we can all agree that how this went down is regrettable. (I actually think those directly involved already do.) Consequences may be unhappy, costly, and painful *but that does not mean that the line between what we choose to do and the consequences is necessarily unjust!* Maybe it is just difficult and sorrowful. Maybe we can agree that there just is no excuse for lawbreaking for anyone—as a matter of the heart and not just rules on the book. Maybe “enough already” can be applied to mob violence and to criminal activity alike. And not because it is utopian but because it is godly. Being godly is good—in God's eyes.

So the account of Joseph's treatment (by his brothers) came down to us as a cautionary tale. We note: God sees all and God holds all accountable for everything they do. Their nefarious dealings are at last exposed and dealt with. The necessity of repentance is upheld. **You may be sure your sins will find you out.** (Num.32:23)—the sin in Num. 32 is that of disobeying God! Christians will not find this teaching too strange—especially those who embrace repentance as our lifestyle! We repent because God does not change, we do! Therefore those who bring about circumstances which result in violence—they are responsible, in part, for whatever violence results.

There is this key, apolitical insight in Hebrews 11, the hall of faith chapter, in verses 33-34:—**who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced/administered (wrought righteousness¹ and) justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of**

¹ They “did what was morally good, or pious/godly.” -Theodoret. In virtue of their quality as judges and kings as faithful leaders living holy lives! They were just and impartial. Carried the laws of justice into execution, particularly on guilty nations. They executed the great purposes of God in punishing the wicked, and in cutting off his foes.-Barnes Notes

weakness, became might/valiant in war, put foreign armies to flight. I view this as most apropos of our current situation! Let me explain what this means: it means it takes faith to enforce, administer, or work justice. Therefore we may repent of our outrage, and of our violence and all efforts to compel just through agitation, or laws and legislature—justice cannot be voted, or policed into existence *it is a work of God!* That's better than mob rule. Justice comes by turning to God—in other words, repentance.

The truth is factual, cleverly devised myths are not. Teaching on Galatians requires a deeper dive into Scripture. I found as I worked on Paul's defense of his ministry as being **from heaven**, I was not as in touch with Peter's testimony as I ought to have been. In 2 Peter 1:16 we read **For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.** Well, if they didn't follow myths², what did they follow? The truth! When I assert that truth is factual, I am asserting that it is factually accurate, reliable and verifiable—attested, or witnessed to by credible witness! It is demonstrable, the gold standard of scientific truth (both observable and repeatable—testable and universally valid). To treat Christianity as a myth meaning not factual is to give away the whole ball game. **We did not follow cleverly devised myths . . . but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. Eye witnesses.** It was not his humanity, nor his teaching, nor his miracles, not his teaching but the fact of **his majesty**. We went with that.

17. For he received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to him from the Excellent Glory: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." **18. And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with him on the holy mountain. Ear witnesses,** too. Thus Peter was positioned well to hear and affirm the testimony of Paul from the Damascus Road experience. Acts 9:1-6: **A light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground he heard a voice** (from heaven) **saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? Who are you, Lord? . . . I am Jesus." . . . The men** (devout Jews and not believers) **traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice, but seeing no one."** **Hearing this voice from heaven** is identical in both cases! And witnessed, verified. Factual truth. Paul repented, if not on the spot, very soon thereafter. He followed the facts. And that is just what we are supposed to do in this American moment . . . test the myth, the cleverly devised myth, but follow the facts and do not be deceived.

² Myths are stories without basis in fact—a workable, but not exhaustive definition of myth. When detractors of our faith say Christianity is a myth this is, rather unabashedly, what they mean. To them not factual means not real and not real means not truth.