

biblestudy: october 2019

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Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

October 6, 2019 Text: Joshua 7:1, 12-13, 20-23 "Sinning Against the Lord"

I don't like these passages of Scripture. This account of Achan is not a pleasant sojourn into the work of God among God's people. I guess I should have seen it coming; the name "Achan" means "to trouble" or "troublesome."

What bothers me is that all of Israel is held responsible for the sin of one man, Achan (Joshua 7:1). I don't mind God getting bent out of shape by the evil committed by Achan, but why take it out on all of Israel (Joshua 7:12)?

Because Achan has violated God's purposes, the entire Israelite army is befuddled (Joshua 7:12). Notice how chapter seven begins: "The Israelites did a disrespectful thing..." (Common English Bible) ... "The Israelites broke faith..." (New Revised Standard Version) ... "The Israelites acted unfaithfully..." (New International Version) ... "The children of Israel committed a trespass..." (King James Version) ... "The Lord's command...was not obeyed (Today's English Version) ... "In a perfidious act, the Israelites..." (Revised English Bible). No matter how it gets translated, the point is clear: all of Israel is responsible for this terrible deed.

God had commanded the Israelites not to take any booty for themselves from a conquered people. Achan stole a beautiful robe, some money, and a gold bar (Joshua 7:21). When one by one each tribe had to admit

if its people had been responsible for this violation of God's ban, Achan admitted what he had done. I'm glad he confessed. I understand why he got punished (Joshua 7:25). What I don't like is that Israel had been beat upon because of this one man's sin.

Then it dawns on me. Those of us in God's community of faith are in life together. What happens to one of us happens to all of us. I cannot separate myself from the body of Christ. If we are united in that one body, then both the blessings and the curses that come to me belong to the whole Church. That is why we hold one another accountable.

Paul wrote the Corinthians: "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26). This strange story of Achan is a foretaste of that New Testament lesson. It still makes me nervous.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In Life Together (SCM Press) Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: "The final break-through to fellowship does not occur, because, though they have fellowship with one another as believers and as devout people, they do not have fellowship as the undevout, as sinners."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Together, Lord, we come together..."

October 13, 2019 Text: Psalm 51:1-5, 9-12, 17 "A Prayer of Repentance"

Here is an update. I just got a text from my son, indicating that he had arrived safely in San Francisco for a business gathering. This morning I met with a friend who is trying to put together a memoir about her fascinating life. Earlier today, I was sad because last night the Duke women's basketball team lost and went to 0-3 in the Atlantic Coast Conference. And, oh, yes. I stopped and got a hair cut on my way home.

Do you see what is happening? I'd like to talk about almost anything except for this week's text. In the Common English Bible it has words like "wrongdoings" (Psalm 51:1, 3) ... words like "guilt" (v. 2, 5) ... words like "sin" (v. 2, 3, 5) ... words like "evil" (v. 4) ... my sins ... guilty deeds ... This is not a happy picture.

I just read through this Psalm aloud. Everywhere the psalmist says "me," I substituted my name. "Have mercy on Belton Joyner, God" ... "Wipe away Belton Joyner's wrongdoings." Try it! It makes this psalm become intensely personal. The psalmist knows himself—and me!—pretty well.

When I was a student at Drew Theological School, this psalm was part of the daily evening prayer. Before the psalter reading, we'd use Psalm 51:15. After our prayer of confession, we'd use Psalm 51:17.

Before the reading of the lectionary lesson, we'd use Psalm 51:6.

October 20, 2019 Text: John 3:1- 8 "Being Born Anew"

Students of the Bible who like to argue about this kind of thing debate the translation of John 3:3, 7. The New Testament word *anōthen* literally means "from above." But, that same word can be used as a figure of speech to mean "from the beginning" or "starting all over" or "again." If we understand that God's prevenient (preceding) grace comes before any faith commitment on our part, can we see that both of these translations capture something of what Jesus wanted to say to Nicodemus? To be born again we have to have birth from above.

Nicodemus was a well-known leader in the Jewish community (John 3:1). No doubt, he comes to talk with Jesus at night to lessen the likelihood of anyone seeing him (John 3:2). I am left to wonder: in what social circumstance am I likely to want to hide the fact that Jesus and I talk with one another? When do I prefer to go "low key" about my faith? Are there situations in which I don't bring Christian values into a discussion?

But take note! Even though Nicodemus came almost surreptitiously,

Indeed, the range of our stance before God is contained in these verses. And primarily, it is about repentance. That becomes the signal of a new beginning.

The repentance God desires does not take any special equipment, any magic words, or any grand gesture. When we are sorry for our sin we already have the equipment, words, and gestures we need. (Look at Psalm 51:17.) God reads the heart more than the lips.

So, although this psalm is full of reminders of my broken places, things I had rather forget or ignore, it is also a word of good news. In order for the healing to begin, God simply wants me to bring my "broken and contrite" self. Amen. So be it!

What Someone Else Has Said:

Don Adams in *Top 10 United Methodist Beliefs* (Abingdon) has written: "Although no comparison is complete, repentance is akin to the premarital engagement period. Certainly there is love at work during that often exciting time of preparation. However, in the normal course of events there must come a time of yielding and commitment in order for love to find its truest and most transforming expression."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Broken I come, O Lord..."

Jesus still talked with him! My form and my fumbling do not have to be 100% theologically correct for Jesus to have time for me. You and I know that this uncertain beginning leads to perhaps the most recognizable thing that Jesus said: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life" (John 3:16). Our Lord uses Nicodemus' slipping in at night as the context for this profound and life-changing statement.

(When I typed that last sentence, I made a typo. I typed "profound and lie-changing statement." Maybe I should have left it. For our Lord indeed does change our lies into truth, our despair into hope, our loss into salvation.)

Seeing kingdom values is not possible from a worldly view (John 3:3). Sometimes I tell a church council that if all of its decisions make sense at the corner store, they have probably made some wrong decisions. Kingdom decisions do not always make sense in the world. Only with

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the gift of a new birth—from above—can we begin to look at the life of God’s kingdom.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *The Printer and the Preacher* (Nelson Books), Randy Petersen quotes George Whitefield: “If we are truly converted, we shall not only be turned and converted from sinful self, but we shall be convert

ed from righteous self. That is the devil of devils: for righteous self can run and hide itself in its own doings, which is the reason self-righteous people are so angry with gospel preachers.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Come from above, Lord, and give me new birth...”

October 27, 2019 Text: Romans 6:1-8, 12-14 “Our New Life In Christ”

These verses from Paul’s letter to the church at Rome sound spooky. It is language we usually hear in science fiction movies or in horror shows: “people who have been brought back to life from the dead” (Romans 6:13). It may be, alas, that the reason this seems so foreign to our daily experience is that we do not see much dramatic difference between our lives and the journeys of those who do not claim to be saved by Christ.

Yet, the apostle is clear that the new life in Christ means the death of the old self, just as Christ’s crucifixion was necessary in order for His resurrection to have meaning (Romans 6:4). Baptism is a sign of our sharing in the death of Christ in order for us to share in His resurrection (Romans 6:3). In the Wesleyan tradition, we are so convinced that God is actively at work to bring that new life (whether we are aware of it or not) that we baptize infants. They clearly do not understand the ritual of baptism, but the Church makes the audacious claim that God’s prevenient grace is already at work.

In a verse that is just down the page from these assigned texts, there is a clue as to what this new life in Christ looks like. Romans 6:16-17 indicates that it is a matter of to whom one is obedient.

Most of the time we can tell what it means to be obedient to Christ (“obedient to righteousness”—Romans 6:16) but life’s decisions are

not always crystal clear. Is it sinful to tell a lie if someone’s life is saved because you tell a lie? Is it wrong to violate a civil law that is unjust? Is it moral to steal a loaf of bread if you are literally dying of hunger? As we sort through all of these (and other) issues, we find good news in Romans 6:14: “Sin will have no power over you, because you aren’t under Law but under grace.”

That doesn’t mean that “anything goes” because we live by grace (Romans 6:1, 15). The new life in Christ is one that is freed from the power of sin (Romans 6:7). Perhaps it will help to remember John Wesley’s awareness that life is a journey toward that perfection. A good question to ask oneself is this: “How are my life decisions and activities reflective of a new life in Christ?”

What Someone Else Has Said:

Roberta Bondi (*To Pray & to Love*, Fortress) has written: “Because of the presence of the image of God within us, what affects the welfare of one of us affects us all, God included...God’s love for us, which draws us, but also our love for God and neighbor, which can never be separated from each other.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Thank You, God, for new life...”

Celebrate Laity Sunday - Third Sunday of October 2019

“Lay” - from the Greek word laikos meaning "of the people."
“Laity” - noun, from the word lay; lay person has a similar church meaning.

Lay Servants are to serve the local church or charge in any way in which their witness or leadership and service inspires the laity to deeper commitment to Christ and more effective discipleship. This includes the interpretation of scriptures, doctrine, organization, and ministries of the church.*

The ministry of the laity is the work of mission or ministry to which each believer is called. As Christians we are all called to this ministry or priesthood – not just clergy. Each of us has a responsibility to proclaim the Good News and reach out to others in love.**

Laity Sunday is a time to recognize the work and mission of all laity — not only within the walls of the church but in everyday lives.

To all the laity in all the churches we celebrate and thank each one of you for your faithful commitment and loving ministry within and beyond the walls of the church.

*<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/lay-servant-ministries>
**<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/ministry-of-the-laity>