

Marion weekly update

SERMON Sept 4 'Prayers: Communion Before There Was Communion' Daniel 9:1-19

This week we have a wonderful convergence of the Old and New Testaments. As we celebrate communion today, a prayer of Daniel is incredibly appropriate to the occasion, even though communion was nowhere near Daniel's mind at the time.

Communion is such a layered and textured experience. We celebrate because we remember the love and grace of God poured out on the cross so that we could be freely forgiven of our sins. At the same time, it is a confessional and repentant moment. Knowing the cost of forgiveness we remember the sin in our lives, are to come before God with confessional hearts, and to move forward with repentant lives. The joy of forgiveness leads to gratitude of heart that drives us to want to do better and lead lives rightly before God with as little need to partake of Jesus' sacrifice as possible.

Daniel is in exile in Babylon. He prays a prayer of confession before God for himself and all Israel. The way he goes about it is a magnificent model of what this kind of prayer looks like, though we'll see a little twist at the end.

He begins with revering and honoring God. He begins with praise. Which means Daniel has his attitude in check. He doesn't come defensive or proud. He comes humble and contrite. Before he comes confessing, he makes sure that his heart is right before God.

Then Daniel dives right into it. He confesses the sin of Israel. Not generally, but as specifically as it fits into a contrite prayer. He echoes the words of the prophets in many ways admitting that Israel has willfully rebelled against God and God's desire. That summarizes it. The point is that he doesn't make some general, wimpy confession. It's not a confession couched in blames towards others for "manipulating" or "forcing" both he and Israel. It's a direct admission of guilt for very real and honest offenses.

This is so critical to an honest prayer of confession. These prayers are intended to be transforming. We can't transform if we can't admit what we need to transform out of and towards. To be specific is to be both humble and courageous. We look in the mirror, admit our shortfalls before God, and in that admission combined with an open heart the doorway to change opens.

Daniel then turns to the consequence that is the elephant in the room. The exile. The desolation of Jerusalem and Israel. This is where having his attitude in check comes full force. He faces the consequence squarely. Daniel doubles down on the sin of Israel. It wasn't just the sin of doing wrong things. It was the sin of ignoring all of the warnings God had sent throughout the whole process. Sin isn't just what we do, sometimes it's also what we ignore.

He faces the consequence squarely and does something incredible. He owns that it's warranted. "You warned us, we didn't listen, then what you warned us about happened, we deserved it." Pretty straightforward and simple. But very necessary and faithful. No railing about "unfair" punishment. No anger at God for being too harsh. Just a simple, real recognition that actions have consequences and Israel's plight is on their own head. Not God's.

So far we have an attitude in check, a flinchless confession of sin, and ownership that the consequence is deserved. Daniel goes on step further instructing us on how to pray confessionally, particularly when we are confessing for a larger group that we are a part of.

Daniel is very "we" oriented. He isn't pointing the finger and separating himself out of the group. Too often there's the "forgive us because of them, but I didn't do anything wrong" condition. It's the sermon where we say "geez I'm glad so and so is here to hear that". Not Daniel. In scripture outside of Jesus and Joseph there aren't many figures painted more positively than Daniel. He's noble, devout, and unwavering. Yet he lumps himself in with sinful Israel. We don't know fully what Daniel has done or not done. What we do know is that in this prayer he doesn't exclude himself from his people. If his people are culpable, he must be too in whatever way, shape, or form.

In any honest prayer of confession we can't exclude ourselves from a larger group we are a part of. We must own that we have some stake in what's gone wrong.

As we read on we see that there is a difference in the nature of sin. Some is individual, some is corporate. Israel's is corporate. There is sin that is momentary and sin that is seasonal, even generational. Israel's sin wasn't a momentary lapse. It wasn't an impulsive temptation given in to. It was intentional, generational, willful refusal to listen to God's warning and instruction to treat one another well and turn from idolatry.

This is a cultural issue. Culture drives our sense of faithfulness. Sometimes it drives our faith in the wrong direction. We think we are following God but in truth are following something else entirely. Someone else's agenda. Someone else's interpretation of scripture. Someone else's manipulation of God to push us a particular direction. Culture eeks in and sends us off the rails.

Israel has been awash in cultural sin for generations because they have allowed themselves to be misled.

Once again, Daniel speaks to the justice of the consequence. God has done all that God could do. God warned. God was patient. God tried. Israel refused to listen. The consequence fell where it fell and was justified. God isn't a God that slams us on a whim. God is a God that loves us, tries to push us in the right direction, and ultimately if we don't listen will allow our actions to bear the fruit that is merited.

Then comes the ask, the petition. This is where it gets interesting. Daniel requests the restoration of the homeland. Of Jerusalem. Of Israel the territory. It has been wrecked as the people of God have been taken away into exile.

The request is for mercy on the long history of Israel's behavior and evidenced in restoring the glory of the land and city and temple of Israel. The petition is very much in keeping with the cultural understandings of God.

Daniel's appeal is to God's name and reputation. A nation's victories and losses, successes and failures were understood to be attached to their God. For a nation to overcome another meant that the victorious nation's god or gods were superior to that or those of their enemy. This prayer for forgiveness and mercy is directly tied to God's image in the world. "Do you want to be seen as the God who broke covenant with/ Your people?" "Do you want to be seen as weaker than these other gods?"

Daniel isn't appealing to a reward for repentance. He is appealing to God's reputation and identity in the world. His closing remarks in the prayer that they are appealing not to their own righteousness but rather to God's mercy is telling.

Daniel can't make a claim on all of Israel. He can't repent for the entire nation. He can only repent himself. In this prayer, however, he can ask God's mercy, forgiveness, and aid to restore given whatever progress Israel has made. To go archaeologically it does seem that post exile Israel made the shift to a true monotheism. Prior to excavations revealed idols in a large number of Israelite homes. Post exile Jewish homes didn't have those additional idols. Something had changed in their faithfulness towards God.

The oddness is that Daniel is not asking for favor due to repentance. That couldn't be offered. He was asking for favor to preserve and elevate God's name once again. This is a very different sense of forgiveness than we have today. For most Christians it's all about preservation of self in the afterlife. For Daniel it's all about elevating God in the here and now.

We had some real and good conversation about all of this in the office this week. Is our repentance the result of God's goodness being instilled in us by the Holy Spirit? Is it that God's goodness means God brings good things into our lives even while we are still sinful and that inspires us to be more like Christ out of gratitude? Is it both? I'd say both.

God is good regardless.

This is the grand part as we celebrate communion. God isn't about our goodness. God is about God's goodness. And God is always good. We simply need to embrace that goodness.

Also, today there is an entirely different sense of what makes God look good. The sense that it's about the success of our endeavors is very Old Testament and reliant on the sense of God being actually vengeful and resistant. That idea was then, not now.

Today we can't claim that God has a claim on any one people. In the Old Testament, the Jews were God's people. It was a singular relationship. After the advent of Christ that changed. No one nation can claim God's nationhood because there are Christians everywhere. Most every nation has men and women who have genuinely bent the knee to Christ. As such, God is the God of every nation.

When we pray, it's not just for our own nation. It's for every nation. Each and every person who claims to follow Christ.

Daniel has an honest prayer to make God "look good" in the world. Today I suggest there is a much more honest notion of what "making God look good" means. It's not about the success of a nation. It's not about the victory of a people.

Whether a nation or people, we see daily that there are those who succeed and prosper not as a result of following God's will but rather in defiance of it.

Success and prosperity have ceased to be the measure of a life of faith. Instead the measure is whether or not we live in love, grace, and compassion. Do we embody the values and life of Jesus? God is no longer represented by a nation, but is represented by a people. Those people are planted in nation after nation around the world.

If we ask God to be an example to the world it is a courageous endeavor. We are not only asking God to transform others. We are asking God to transform us. We are asking to be made new creations first. Since there's no corner on what nation is truly God's, we must embody a people that belongs to God. That peoplehood is defined not by physical boundaries but by spiritual ones.

This is the heart of communion. "I love you, and I know you love me because you died a torturous death to bring me to redemption. Now help me to live into a life worthy of representing the gratitude for that circumstance."

This is heavy. It feels like if we're going to bring people to God we need to do it correctly. Daniel didn't have the same endgame in mind. He was looking for His nation to be self-correcting. He wanted God to be glorified.

We want the same thing. We want God to be glorified. For that to happen it happens through us. It happens when we confess rightly and then put the grunt work to repentance.

This morning what do we have to confess? What do we have to unburden, release, and change before God? These are the questions of celebrating communion.