

National Repentance #6: Proclaiming Repentance in the Public Square

Colleagues,

I received the text below from Steve Kuhl, an ELCA pastor in Wisconsin, on Tuesday. Right now in Mid-USA it's Wednesday morning. But this is so good that I can't wait another 24 hours before posting it to you. For one thing there's Steve's remarkable "parrasia" [=the NT Greek term for the chutzpah of faith-grounded public speech "that conceals nothing and passes over nothing" (Danker)]. And even more his law-and-promise theology and his ingenious crossing of that theology to the USA today. You get the picture. It's so good that I can't wait for Thursday to roll around. So here it comes. Besides, you receivers are a worldwide audience and it IS already Thursday (just barely) amongst the kiwis in New Zealand. Peace and Joy!

Ed

[Dear Ed. For your info: This address was given at the "United We Stand" Rally in Mukwonago, Wisconsin on Sunday, October 14, 2001. While there is no official count of those who attended, the Mukwonago Chief, our local newspaper, said "there were a lot of people there." (I'd guess 500 or more.) Other speakers and activities included Margret Farrell (Lt. Gov. of Wisconsin), Scott Jenson (Speaker of the Wisconsin House of Representatives), Stephen Nass (State Representative), Jim Wagner (Village President), VFW and Legion, and Boy Scout posts, various-aged groups of school children leading the rally in the "Pledge," the National Anthem, "America The Beautiful," a prayer by Rev. Wendy Meyer (Big Bend Baptist Church), "Amazing Grace"

sung by Rev. Anne Holmes (Mukwonago Unitarian Universalist Church), and a special recognition of all civil servants (firefighters, police, military veterans, and paramedics).]

UNITED WE KNEEL

Fellow Americans, dear neighbors, and people of good will, While the news media and our government have been focusing our nation on a “secular” response to the events of September 11 (a response which includes the military buildup, coalition building, humanitarian assistance, homeland security, economic bailouts, and the like) we, the church, have been focusing the nation on a “spiritual response.” Both responses are important. Both responses are inseparably intertwined. Both responses relate to the complexity of the times. And both responses call for great sacrifice on the part of the nation. But they are sacrifices of a very different kind. Whereas the secular response focuses on our “strengths” (militarily, economically, even morally) over against the human enemies we face, that they may not defeat us on account of our strength; the spiritual response of the church focuses on our “weakness” before God, that God may not defeat us on account of our weakness. And don’t be fooled. This spiritual response is not easy for us to make. Indeed, making an adequate spiritual response to God is much harder than making an adequate secular response to our human foes and our physical needs. That’s because an adequate spiritual response calls us to examine our way of life, to question our stewardship of the many blessings God has given us, and to acknowledge our less-than-neighborly concern for the weaker members of the global community. In a word, the kind of spiritual response that September 11 calls for is “repentance.”

Now don't get me wrong. To emphasize repentance is not to say that "providing comfort" to sufferers is not also an important part of our spiritual response to September 11. It is! The deeper truth, however, is that "repentance" and "providing comfort" go together. Why else do we say "I'm sorry" when someone tells us of their suffering, as though we are somehow implicated in their suffering? It's because repentance makes "providing comfort" all the more real. Repentance connects people in their common weakness. Therefore, helping a person or group or nation or world to respond to life's circumstance repentantly is the most basic spiritual task.

The Hebraic, Islamic, and Christian prophets all make clear that repentance is a universal need of all humanity—as universal as our secular need for food, clothing, shelter, and, as we Americans would add, human rights. That's because of the universal reality of sin, a malady that overshadows the whole human family regardless of race, color, creed, or national origin. No amount of homeland security can prevent it from entering our borders and terrorizing our lives. Ironically, as the Scripture itself makes clear, repentance seems hardest for those people who are most aware of—and most proud of—their strengths. For some reason (and that reason is endemic to sin, our tendency to think more highly of ourselves than we should) the strong in the world tend to use their strengths to hide the truth of their weakness. It is easy for the strong to sing "God bless America" and to thank God for their strengths. But is that really an adequate spiritual response to life, especially when life is experiencing crisis? Is it a deep enough and honest enough response? We know Jesus' story of the two men who went into the temple to pray. One prayed "Thank you, God, for making me good, not like that guy over there. God bless me." That other guy prayed simply, "Lord be merciful to me, a sinner." He repented. Then Jesus asked, "Who do you think went

away justified before God?" Whose spiritual response do you think is adequate to the whole truth? The answer is no secret: It's the one who repented.

The spiritual danger for the strong and the good is that they too often use their blessings to avoid dealing with their weaknesses. They may praise God with their lips, but without repentance, without dealing with their weaknesses before God, they actually dishonor God, remain in their weakness, and go away unjustified. That's why for the prophets and the psalmists, the first words they enjoin us to say are not words like "God bless America" but "Lord have mercy on us all." (Ps. 51:1) In like manner, not "United we stand" but "United we kneel," humbly before our God, would be a much more appropriate slogan for a prayer vigil like this. For only a "broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart" (Ps 51:17), as the psalmist says, is the kind of spirit that avails before God, that God weeps for, that God has mercy upon. That's because God is a God eager to forgive; a God desirous to "create in us a clean heart" and "to put a new and right spirit within us." (Ps. 51:10) Of course, true, deep repentance is possible only through faith in a God who forgives. For me as a Christian, that God is known only in Jesus Christ, crucified and raised.

This spiritual, penitential response to God is not anti-patriotic. On the contrary, it is the only truly patriotic thing that can be done spiritually. For note! The goal of repentance is nothing less than that of "saving the nation" from a danger that is even larger than the human enemies we face: God's very own judgment on our sins and on our prideful use—and selfish misuse—of our blessings. Nor does repentance undermine or undercut the other kinds of secular responses that may need to be made in the days ahead, including the military, economic, humanitarian, and homeland security responses that may also be needed. But repentance does put them in a new

light.

Sadly, we may need more military strikes, but never in self-justification for our national goals, but always in sorrow for our past failures, for our present weakness, and for our culpability with regard to suffering around the world and at home. Most definitely, we will need to give humanitarian aid. For we cannot expect to save our way of life at the expense of the life of foreigners without facing the wrath of God. Repentance also gives us a new view of world events. We tend to think that God uses the righteous to overcome the wicked, as the movies depict, and we tend to think the world is easily labeled into that which is good and that which is evil. But, as the prophets point out, that is not necessarily so. The God who rules the world this side of paradise is always left with "using one scoundrel to punish another," as Martin Luther used to say. Oftentimes in the heat of the moment, God is not interested in the blame game, of arguing the finer points of who is better than whom. That's not because God is indifferent to evil, but because God prefers that everyone repent. (Repentance is more important to God than whether we win or lose a military campaign, though we may rightly pray for victory.) But what is certain is this: each scoundrel who has their day of boasting will also have their day of weeping. The only question is "When?"

But repentance can also bring forth new possibilities. And that characteristic of repentance is the most basic reason for hope today. God is on record throughout Holy Scripture as a God who repents of his judgments upon people who turn to the Lord with repentant hearts. Remember the story of Jonah, for example. Remember it not for the miracle of the big fish, but for the miracle of repentance. Remember how God told Jonah that he was going to destroy the great city of Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire (the enemy who defeated the people of

Israel) unless Nineveh repented. Remember how Jonah, an Israelite, did not want to bring the message of repentance to the king of Assyria because he wanted God to destroy Nineveh. Remember how God forced Jonah to preach repentance in the streets of the city anyway. Remember how the king heeded the advice of the reluctant, haphazard preaching of Jonah and surprisingly issued a public decree that everyone repent on behalf of the nation. Remember how God spared the nation of Assyria from their destruction because of their repentance. Remember how Jonah pouted under the fig tree, because God was merciful to Nineveh, his enemy.

In the Book of Jonah a miracle happened: the reluctant preaching of repentance by a hateful Jonah led to a sincere response of repentance by his Assyrian enemy. What I'm about to say next might sound sacrilegious at first. But bear with me, please, for I think what I am about to say fits like hand in glove with the message of Jonah—and the Bible's wild imagination about repentance. What if we thought about our enemy, Osama Bin Laden, who wants us dead, the way the king of Assyria thought about his enemy, Jonah, who also wanted him dead? Osama Bin Laden our Jonah? Sounds crazy, I know—as crazy as Jesus saying to the terrorized people of his day, that they will have no sign of what to do spiritually except for the sign of Jonah, an obscure hint from God, like a thorn in the flesh, suggesting their need for repentance. (Luke 11:30) But wouldn't it be ironic if the reluctant preaching of Osama Bin Laden about our need to repent . . . and you know as well as me that, like Jonah, in his heart of hearts Bin Laden doesn't really want us to repent before God. Quite the opposite, he wants to poison our relation to God. . . But what if his accusations of our sinfulness (whether documentable or not) was actually met by us with sincere repentance before God? What if we got God's hint and discerned the sign of Jonah in the person of Bin

Laden? Why we'd take the most powerful weapon in his terrorist arsenal right out of his hands: the rightful judgment of God upon our sins. But we are more fortunate than Nineveh. We have not only a reluctant Jonah preaching the message of repentance grudgingly. We have something "greater than Jonah." (Luke 11:32) We have a church (which is called to be the presence of Christ in our midst) that loves the nation so much that it will not shrink from its patriotic duty to proclaim the message of repentance to the people of the United States in such a way that gives the hope of God's forgiveness to all. That's why, tonight, "united we kneel" before God in humble repentance.

Just so you do not think that all that I am saying is too biblical to make any practical sense in the American context, allow me an example where it was actually applied here in these United States—and applied precisely at that point in our national history when we were the least united. Abraham Lincoln was then the first Republican president to ever hold that office. The nation was torn in two by a bloody Civil War. What was a president to do? The date was March 30, 1863. A resolution came across the president's desk (from the senate) asking the president to proclaim a "national fast day," a day of "national prayer and humility," a day of national repentance. Yes. Amidst all the military, economic, and humanitarian planning that needed to be done, here, leaders of good will saw repentance as a national priority. What is striking in the proclamation is the starkness with which they interpret the national calamity as God's punishment on the nation. Let me read the heart of the proclamation.

"And whereas it is the duty of nations as well as of men, to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions, in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon; and to recognize the sublime truth announced in the

Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations only are blessed whose God is Lord.

“And, in so much as we know that, by his divine law, nations like individuals are subjected to punishments and chastisements in this world, may we not justly fear that the awful calamity of civil war, which now desolates the land, may be but a punishment, inflicted upon us, for our presumptuous sins, to the needful end of our national reform of the whole People?”

With Lincoln-and those who took this proclamation seriously-“may we not justly fear” now, as they did then, that the ruins we witness today in our country be understood as God’s call for us to repent, a call issued not primarily to some “immoral fringe” of society, as some of our religious leaders have suggested, but to “the whole People,” as Lincoln suggested? Such repentance does not excuse the wrong of others. But it does humbly acknowledge our wrongs in a way that only we can do, with a hope for renewal that only God can give.

So “united we kneel.” That is the only appropriate spiritual response we can make. Don’t begrudge the church if, instead of waving the flag, we choose to make the sign of the cross. For in the cross of Christ, weakness is turned into strength, and the grace of forgiveness becomes the power for repentance. Lord, have mercy on us all, as we respond faithfully, humbly, repentantly to the challenges of our time.

Thank you for your patience.

*Steven C. Kuhl
Mukwonago, Wisconsin
October 14, 2001*