

I believe that the text of Mark's Gospel has a very pointed word for us today, and in order for me to bring that word to you, I need to begin by confessing my own sin.

I have not done enough. I have not done enough to address racism, or gun violence, hate crimes toward persons of color, religious or sexual minorities. I have not done enough to address privilege and poverty. I have been too comfortable with the way things are, too cynical about our ability or will to change culture, and too willing to settle for less than redemption.

I tend, for instance, as I suspect many of us do, to default to work that I have done as a *defense*; a justification, against my own sin. I just completed two years as the chair of the board of Intown, working to address hunger and homelessness issues in Atlanta. I serve on the Board of the Covenant Network, a group in the church committed to full inclusion of LGBT persons and seeking now to discern if there is room in the church for leadership on racial reconciliation.

I like to believe that I seek quietly to address the very issues I have raised, but I know my work is not enough.

If, in hearing my confession, your reaction is, "Well, if he's confessing his sin after all that, I'm in *big trouble*," I hate even more to tell you, "Yes. Yes, you are."

And so are we all, because it is *sin* we are talking about.

A number of years ago, my friend DC Horne and I had a rather fun pulpit back and forth for several weeks. The basic thrust of the jesting between us was that while I like preaching and try to be fairly competent at it, she dislikes it and makes no bones about the fact that she'd rather give a cat a bath than prepare a sermon. But after some time, she brought a manuscript to me of a sermon she had preached in the early eighties, and she said, "I have joked so much about how much I dislike preaching that I feel that I should actually share with you a sermon that I preached that I am proud of."

So I took her sermon and read it, and it took my breath away with the simplicity of its message and the urgent claim on its listeners. Preaching in a prominent pulpit as the associate pastor of a large church, DC felt the call to a prophetic word to a comfortable congregation.

The word she had to bring was about the AIDS epidemic and the church's response to it. It was gutsy. It was bold. And what made it gutsy and bold was that she addressed issues such as sex and the transmission of disease in rather frank terms, and then she began to repeat the line that I remember to this day.

Addressing her congregation, DC said, "I am not telling you that the church has an AIDS problem. I am telling you the church has AIDS."

And she went on to preach that if any part of the body has an affliction, if anyone in the body has an affliction, the whole body has it.

So, we can't say the culture has a problem with racism. If the culture does, the church does.

So, We can't say that the culture has a problem with hate crimes. We're in the culture. If the culture has a problem with hate crimes, the church has hate crimes.

So, we can't say that culture has a problem with violence – if the culture does, the church has violence.

Now, generally speaking, I don't have the bandwidth to be prophetic across a whole host of issues all the time, and frankly, prophets have something of a tendency to be tiresome. Nobody likes a scold.

I don't like a scold, and I generally like to be liked.

But it would be wrong of us to worship God today, to sing "Fairest Lord Jesus," and stop with "Thee would I cherish, thee would I honor," and not get to the part about where Jesus "Makes the woeful heart to sing."

It would be a problem because there's really no question about what mechanism Jesus uses to *make the woeful heart to sing*. It's you and me, and that's why we have to be honest about our sin in order to do something about "it."

So, I acknowledge that I am a reluctant preacher today. I don't like thinking about violence. I don't like thinking about what got us to this moment. I don't like thinking about things I don't like thinking about!

So, I had a brief conversation this Thursday with a friend here at the church, a member of the congregation with whom I'm not politically in alignment, and I treasure the fact that we can have an adult conversation about issues without either of us getting mad and stalking off – and mind you, we're going to see a lot of that now that people are starting to think it's a good idea to run for president – and we were talking about the shootings in Charleston.

We wondered what goes through someone's mind to get from thinking about doing violence to *actually* doing it.

We wondered about what has to be absent in the fabric of community to allow someone to get from *thinking* to *doing*.

And that's when she captured the essence of sin as perfectly and clearly as I have heard it expressed. She said simply, "There's something wrong, Baron."

We tend to get hung up on the deliverables of sin, the particular misdeeds, and we *miss* the pervasive quality of sin.

Acknowledging there is something wrong is a confession of *sin*.

And that's the thing about sin, most of the time, it's not a straight line to get from things that are very wrong in culture to things that are over the line behaviorally.

So, we might be able to acknowledge racism in culture, but it's a little harder to get a straight line from the racism that we know we see to the killings in the church in Charleston.

We might be able to acknowledge homophobia and hate crimes against minorities: racial, sexual and religious, but it's hard to draw a straight line from bigoted speech in the political realm to a specific hate crime.

We might even be able to acknowledge issues of poverty and privilege, but it's hard to draw a straight line from particular privilege and particular poverty to the turnstile on the prison gate where persons of color, while comprising only 30 percent of the American population comprise sixty percent of the prison population.¹

Here's the thing, as a reluctant prophet, I get all the reasons the lines are hard to draw. But here is the truth of sin: the line may not go in a straight path, but the lines still connect.

The line may be jagged, but it's still a line.

There may not be a straight line between particular attitudes of racism and particular killings, but there is a jagged line.

There may not be a direct linkage between particular hate speech and particular hate crimes, but there is a jagged line.

There may not be a well-ruled line between economic policy and systemic poverty and the fact the United States is fifth in the world in prison population, but there sure is a jagged line.

And here's the thing about sin: if we're living *with* sin, we're living *in* sin. It puts me in mind of that wonderful old quote about sin attributed to Flannery O'Connor, "You ain't got to; you can't help it."

And maybe it *is* worse lately. If so, I suspect that it is a result of our national temperature being steadily raised by false outrage and manufactured indignation. But maybe it's not. Maybe we just know more now. But if culture has a problem, the church has a problem.

¹ www.naacp.org

That doesn't mean that I see no hope today. I do. And I take it, strangely enough, from our Gospel lesson today, where the disciples are overwhelmed with fear as the boat carries them from one side of the Sea to the other.

When the disciples got on the boat to go to the other side, they got on a boat that they knew would carry them to a place of deep discomfort.

They were going to the other side.

They were leaving the comfort and security of life as they knew it. They were leaving the environment where *their* faith was the dominant voice and they were going to a place where they would follow Jesus into world completely alien to them.

They left the Jewish side of the sea, and they went to the Gentile side. They don't know it yet, but Jesus will embark on what can only appear to be a systematic campaign to ritually defile himself with the dead, the diseased, the unclean and the excluded.

There, Jesus would embark on a campaign to take grace to those previously seen as outside of grace. The Jewish messiah would carry the good news of God to those previously outside of God's grace. And at times, even Jesus would seem unsure about what he was doing.

But the disciples don't know any of that yet, they just know they are going to a place of deep discomfort and fear.

And they get on the boat anyway. Sometimes the act of discipleship is just getting on the boat.

They get on the boat, and a storm blows up.

I mean, *Of Course a Storm blows up!!!* Anyone could see that storm coming a mile away. It's like when music starts in *Jaws*, or when the one friend gets separated from the others with a stalker on the loose. *OF COURSE A STORM BLOWS UP!*

But they got on the boat. And the storm blew up. And they cried out in fear to Jesus. And then Jesus rebuked the storm.

I don't know where most of you are on the issues that I've raised today. I can hazard a few guesses, and I suspect I'm right about a few and wrong about some others. Some of you listening are probably embracing the challenge because you know something is wrong. Others know there's something wrong but perhaps you think I've missed the mark as to how or what to do about it. Still a few, buried deep down, I suspect, harbor a secret hope that doing nothing is, in fact, a valid strategy because you are sufficiently sure of your security to gamble that these problems won't make it to your doorstep. If you are any of those, or all of those, or a little bit of each some of the time, may I suggest we go to the other side? I don't know what we'll find, but I know there's good news needed.

Are you happy with where we are now? If not, get on the boat.

Do you like what's going on? If not, get on the boat.

Sure, it's scary, and there is no guarantee anything will get done, but I can assure you that staying put on the safe, comfortable easy side of the aisle will guarantee that absolutely nothing gets done about these issues and a whole host other.

I don't have a policy solution to violence, to racism, bigotry, privilege or poverty – I'm a preacher. And maybe you don't know the solutions either.

But perhaps we can start by just saying, "Something is wrong."

Have I told you my favorite William Sloane Coffin quote? He was talking to Henry Kissinger, and the Secretary finally became so exasperated by Coffin's dogged raising of social issues to be fixed that he said, "Bill, what would you have me *do* about it?"

Coffin paused, the replied, "Mr. Secretary, I am a Christian minister. It is my job to call for justice to roll down like waters. It is your job to figure out the irrigation system.

There was a particular event, the shootings in Charleston, that gave rise to thinking about the general issues of racism, violence, bigotry and privilege and poverty. And if our culture is grappling with racism, violence, bigotry, privilege and poverty, then the church is too.

Like I said, I don't have the answers, but I do know that this church is full of creative, intelligent, energetic people who God is planning and hoping to use to make the woeful heart to sing. Won't you get on the boat?

Getting on the boat doesn't mean we agree on a political solution. It means we agree there is a problem and we know we can't stop.

Some of you may not agree with what Drew or I believe about gun violence. Get on the boat anyway – there is still work to be done.

Some of you may have misgivings about what I or Drew believe about gender and sexuality inclusion. Get on the boat anyway. We can still work together.

If you don't know yet what to do, start with raising your voice to say, "Something is wrong."

And while you're raising it, keep doing the kingdom-building things we know we *are* called to do, you remember them from our t-shirts?

ADVOCATE. ASSEMBLE. LISTEN. INTERACT. PROCLAIM. DONATE.

COLLECT. TUTOR. SERVE. You can do these things, and so can I. And they won't be enough. But they are measurable, demonstrable means by which the woeful heart can be made to sing.

Do you want to be a disciple? Go across to the other side.

Notice this, though: nothing the disciples could do could calm the storm. All they could do was raise their voices. It was God who stilled the storm.

We do know that: that in the end, *in the end grace and peace come only from God.*

I know we can't earn God's grace. But I wonder – can we learn grace?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.