

The Rev. Ryan Fischer
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Second Sunday after the Epiphany
January 16, 2022

Lectionary Year C: Isaiah 12:1-5; John 2:1-11

How many times have we spoken the words, "We are truly sorry and we humbly repent"? They are, as an Episcopalian would know, the words from the Confession in the Prayer Book. They are general and broad enough, for sure...so much so that they can churn up varieties of thoughts and emotions depending on what you're bringing before the Lord at the moment.

On this occasion, I find these words especially fitting for myself, albeit with a small change to the pronouns. This morning, I would like to say, "I am truly sorry and I humbly repent." There is something very wrong that I did in the wee hours Tuesday night that I must repent of. I was arrested by the Whitley County Sheriff for Operating While Intoxicated and Reckless Driving, both of which could be reasonable grounds for termination as your Rector. It is my conviction that, to avoid this, I must repent of my wrongdoing and, if possible, receive your forgiveness.

And so, I ask, "Will you forgive me?"

Now, let's look at some things related and unrelated to forgiveness. To start with, forgiveness does not involve a release from responsibility; to be specific, I must be held responsible for endangering the public safety by driving drunk. This will be worked out through the justice system as it determines the penalties for

my offense. Let's call this the "hard" stuff, as in quantifiable facts and figures. But the "hard" stuff isn't so hard in comparison to the "soft" stuff...that isn't so soft. Soft stuff is everything that's difficult to quantify and measure. How, for example, do you measure something like trust? In this situation, I feel as if I violated the trust you placed in me to be a responsible adult. You don't call a priest to your church expecting him or her to be reckless; on the contrary, you expect your priest to be a role model and an example to people who need deliverance from irresponsibility and bad choices. In that regard, I violated the trust you placed in me.

For that, I am truly sorry and I humbly repent.

But forgiveness is not yet impossible. Yes, forgiveness should be unconditional and genuine; however, there are a few things that can facilitate it. If, for example, the person asking for forgiveness promises to do something to prevent a mistake from repeating itself, it'll be a little easier to forgive that person. In my case, I am making a commitment to stop drinking alcoholic beverages apart from the small amount of wine I consume at the celebration of the Eucharist. There may be people who think, "Wow, that's a little drastic!" or "What about moderation?", and I'll admit that, in some cases, moderation works for me, but, obviously, it didn't work for me on Tuesday night. Neither I nor society can afford those kinds of risks, especially when motor vehicles are involved.

That said, will you forgive me?

In addition, a choice has been placed before me, and my arrest made that choice exceedingly clear: Priesthood or drinking? Because I truly enjoy being a priest, I choose priesthood, and I will do everything possible to remain true to that choice. I know that I can count on people who have been through these things, too, and who are on the road to recovery themselves.

Now, I have to prepare you for some things that don't necessarily involve your Rector directly. There may be people in the community who may say (putting it gently) unhelpful things in light of what has happened. I pray that you would have the strength and courage to not take something like that to heart. We all need to stay focused on the mission and ministry of St. Anne's Episcopal Church, which includes, of course, forgiveness as well as (in the words of our Vision Statement) "giving hope, bringing joy, and loving each other."

Still, I feel I need to apologize for the worry, stress, and anxiety that my actions have placed on this community of faith, realizing that some of the unhelpful things you may hear around town are, indeed, a result of my actions. Again, I pray that this may not dispirit this congregation and our ministries. Should this ever happen, remember my question, "Will you forgive me?"

Yet I remain profoundly grateful for the outpouring of prayer and support I've received over the last several days. ^{It} I has been both humbling and amazing to see the love and care you show your Rector in spite of what he has done. I'm not going to name names here,

but you know who you are, whether you were at the Whitley County Jail on ~~Tuesday~~^{wednesday} morning, whether you texted, emailed, or called to tell me that I was in your prayers, whether you attended the first Eucharist I celebrated following my release from jail on Wednesday afternoon, whether you offered legal counsel or advice with handling the situation, or whether you were throwing your arms in the air in exasperation, because God is accustomed to hearing his childrens' lamentations, too...all of these are examples of how seriously you take Jesus' call to love your neighbor in the myriad of ways in which this is possible.

I know that there will be long journeys ahead of both you and me. As for you, the people of St. Anne's, please don't feel you have to make significant changes because your priest has a problem with alcohol. You have events here that serve beer and wine, which are stellar models of responsibility and moderation. Very strangely, though, the Gospel text for this morning happens to be the account of Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana, and yes, this text illustrates how God really wants our celebrations to be joyful, and, as in the days of old and today, wine plays a part in that. Must everyone partake, though? Of course not! But I still don't think that in itself justifies adding and Eighteenth Amendment enacting Prohibition at St. Anne's to our bylaws.

Part of my journey, therefore, will be learning how to live in the world the way it is -- with wine and beer and liquor flowing abundantly. Currently, I have no desire to have a drink, and I haven't had a drink in five days. But, there will, of course, be times

when I am challenged and tempted, but I also know someone locally who is in recovery and has offered his help already, very graciously. Please be assured that I am taking appropriate measures to deal with my problem, and that I wish to do so with both transparency and dignity.

For obvious reasons, I really didn't want to preach on today's Gospel text, but if you read all of the lectionary texts for any given Sunday, there will always be something that will surprise us and speak to us regardless of where we are. In our First Reading, the prophet Isaiah seeks to offer hope to the Israelites, who, at this point in history, are in the process of returning from their exile in Babylon. In the Old Testament, periods of exile (like those in Egypt and Babylon) are often presented as punishments for unfaithfulness and idolatry. But even as God's people make mistakes and face punishment for their mistakes, God's mercy is steadfast and never-ending. This, above all, is a source of assurance and hope for God's people, and this is the tone in which the prophet Isaiah writes in today's First Reading.

Jerusalem -- their holy city -- was largely destroyed prior to the exile in Babylon, so these verses in Isaiah, chapter 62 seek to encourage the Israelites as they await Jerusalem's restoration. Let us look, in particular, at verse 4, where we read, "You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married" (62:4). Three things are happening here -- first, the resto-

ration of Jerusalem; second, the renaming of Jerusalem (to My Delight Is in Her and Married), indicating a reconciliation between God and the people of Jerusalem; and third, the "wedding" of sorts between God, the bridegroom and Jerusalem, the bride. Now, this is all being spoken of in the context of tremendous loss, destruction, and alienation, but even in this context, the prophet is able to see the restoration that God can bring.

Part of the good news I'd like to share with you today is that, with God, restoration is possible. From the rubble of this situation can emerge something good, because I need not be stuck in the patterns of destructive behavior that have led me to this point. If I might regain your trust, you'll see that I'll no longer be termed Forsaken and Desolate -- both with your help and with God's help. The prophet Isaiah foretold of this transformation of the city of Jerusalem; my hope is similar, but simpler. I'm simply going to hope that I can change, which, I think, our theology and our teachings allow us to do.

Regardless of what I have done, the words are the same: "I am truly sorry and I humbly repent." And that's where restoration and amendment of life can begin.

Amen.