

I come to you tonight with two distinct roles.

On the one hand, I represent “organized religion” and the “institutional church.” And our Church is only at the beginning, I think, of recognizing a need to repent publicly from its complicity in sexual violence. There is much more to do but naming the reality of sexual violence and how our institution has too often turned a blind eye toward it, underestimated its impact, and shirked its responsibility to provide safe spaces for all people, especially children. So I need to repent because I am part of an organization that has sinned against God and against its own people by not acknowledging sexual violence, by not holding perpetrators accountable, by not providing safe spaces of refuge and by discouraging truth-telling. I hope this service is one piece of Grace Church’s, and the Church Universal’s, ongoing work of repentance and rebuilding trust. I come as a penitent.

And on the other hand, I come here as a seeker – seeking healing for hurt caused by sexual violence within my own family, one by a relative and another by a member of the clergy and within a parish of which I was a part in Chapel Hill, NC in which a fellow Vestry member was arrested and convicted of interstate pornography using his child. So I need to heal because I’ve been hurt and betrayed by people in positions of authority.

Repentance doesn’t happen just because someone says “sorry.” Two-year-olds reminds us of that – when they are developing the capacity to recognize their actions affect others. Pretty early on we teach them to say “sorry,” but usually it is a mechanical thing forced by a parent: “Say you’re sorry.” And repentance isn’t “remorse,” which is just “feeling badly about what happened.”

To repent is to take action that leads to a future closer to God’s dream for us. The Christian spiritual path teaches that repentance is a four-step process.

First, there must be confession: acknowledging the violation of bodies and betrayal of trust and its absolute “wrongness.”

The next step involves the God. It is that perpetrator receives pardon. Divine Pardon doesn’t mean: “Oh don’t worry about it. Try harder next time.” “Oh don’t worry, forgiveness is unlimited” like some sort of Get of Jail Free card that would cheapen God’s forgiveness, not to mention God’s moral law. Instead divine pardon is like a promissory note – a dose of hope and courage graciously given by God to the perpetrator for the hard work ahead of reckoning with the consequences of the wrongdoing and making amends

Making amends is the third step – this is also known in Christian language as doing penance. What one does as penance will look different for every person. Perhaps it involves listening to others’ pain and lament and directly telling the survivor you were wrong. Perhaps it involves educating others or being and advocate for accountability and safety policies. I hope that this service tonight is one way the institutional church is making amends.

And the final step in repentance is the restoration of a relationship. Obviously, this only happens if and when the survivor agrees to it. And frankly that is rare, as it should be given how the dynamics of sexual violence work. But if the relationship is at all restored, it happens only when the perpetrator takes responsibility for repairing the wrong.

So as I've laid this out, you can see repentance is hard. It requires moral courage and spiritual grace. And it is often not fully realized – as is evidenced time and time again in our national media and in our communities where relationships are severed or “dealt with” primarily through our legal system, which is essential and important to all of this, but separate from the spiritual work of repentance and healing we're doing together tonight.

Now the fact that true repentance is hard and that it is rare may sound depressing especially to those among us who seek healing. But here is the good news: our healing isn't dependent on what the perpetrator does; whether he or she ever confesses or ever attempts to make amends. Those of us seeking healing need NOT give the perpetrator that kind of power and control.

The good news is this: meaningful healing is available to each of us, is God's intention for each of us and for us collectively. Part of our healing is claiming our voice in telling the truth, when we are ready taking off the shroud of shame that mutes our voices, feeling the pain and anger and claiming our bodies as beautiful and bearing the image of God that is inviolable, that by its nature cannot be tarnished no matter what has happened to it the beauty and image of God remains, and claiming our spirits as capable of joy and peace. Healing takes time, maybe a lifetime but it is possible.

So tonight, I want to invite you to receive the Spirit's healing grace. And maybe a first step toward healing is to rest. When we've been hurt from sexual violence, restfulness is one of the things that may be taken from us. To survive, we've learned to run on high-alert mode ready to freeze, fight, flee from danger or – and this can be very subtle – but over-functioning -- trying to make sure everyone else is okay when really God's call is to slow down and attend to ourselves

Physiologically our bodies heal when we are at rest. Our bodies when we rest, fearfully and wonderfully made, secrete hormones that build tissue and our adrenal system regulates the mixture of stress swirling in our blood stream. And on a psychological level, our brains reset sorting all kinds of information and putting it in its proper place. Rest is healing gift; one of God's healing gifts.

My prayer for each of us this night is that we are safe enough at least for a few moments to rest, to breathe deeply, and notice what it is like to feel safe, to feel loved, to feel in charge of our bodies, minds and souls.

“Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

Amen.

Offered by The Rev. Joslyn Ogden Schaefer to the people of Grace Church, Lent V, March 18, 2018