

Greetings church,

Third time's the charm. During our weekly newsletter I'll be inviting you all along on my journey through a book by Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg entitled, "On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World". We'll begin with her introduction.

Ruttenberg lays her cards on the table immediately. "To put it bluntly, American society isn't very good at doing the work of repentance or repair."¹ I agree with her wholeheartedly. The emphasis has been on either a) brushing harm done under the rug by letting the wounded person or persons "calm down" and giving them a chance to "get over it"; or b) the harmed person doing forgiveness work while the person who perpetrated the harm goes along their merry way harming others as they've not been held accountable for the harm done. *It doesn't have to be this way.* There are ways to meaningfully address harm done and hold the perpetrator accountable for his or her actions. Ruttenberg suggests that we need to look to our Jewish forebears, our own Old Testament, for clues as to the way forward.

"In Judaism, the concepts of repentance, forgiveness, and atonement are very separate categories, and the traditions place the highest emphasis on the work of repentance."² (This will become a sermon series at some point as I can pull from my seminary work. I took a Hebrew class on the Psalms and we covered this very topic.) While the Jewish tradition emphasizes repentance, American culture is highly resistant to the work of repentance. Why?

Ruttenberg makes a number of valid points in her argument as to this resistance. 1) Individualism; "our society ... focuses on *rights* afforded to the individual, rather than on our *obligations* to one another"³ and "the rugged individualism of American culture has the potential to leave people alone, nursing their wounds in solitude, without support."⁴ 2) Self-interest; our cultural "thirst for instant gratification ... privileges immediate catharsis over the hard, painstaking work of process and transformation"⁵ Have you noticed our declining willingness, as a nation, to put in a hard day's work? That applies to the concept of poor repentance work as well because repentance is not easy but a long, arduous journey of self-examination and change before one can even think about possibly offering a true, sincere apology. "... Self-interest is for those with power, and it disincentivizes the work of repentance"⁶ and instead often looks like "the pursuit of ends without concern for harm or exploitation caused in the process".⁷ 3) "... A watered-down, secularized distortion of Protestant thinking that has infused American culture."⁸ That one needs only to feel sorry for, or about, their sin is a lie. The German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was martyred by the Nazi regime has a lot to say on this topic. Forgiveness without repentance is "cheap grace". This ties into her second point about self-interest. An "emphasis on one's inner state over one's outward actions, may have had a cultural consequence of privileging intent over

¹ Ruttenberg, Danya. On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World. Beacon Press, Boston, MA; 2022. p.3

² *ibid*, p.4

³ *ibid*, p.5

⁴ *ibid*, p.5

⁵ *ibid*, p.6

⁶ *ibid*, p.7

⁷ *ibid*, p.6

⁸ *ibid*, p.7

impact when considering our actions and their outcomes”.⁹ Finally, 4) the use of theology “in the service of power in the wake of the Civil War. Shortly after the conflict ended, northern clergy began preaching forgiveness, reconciliation, and unity with white southerners, at the expense of justice, or even safety, for Black Americans, whether newly emancipated or already free.”¹⁰ It seems very clear that we have a cultural repentance issue. Just because our little church community can’t influence American culture on a macro-scale, doesn’t mean we can’t positively impact our church community and our broader Lexington community. We have some repentance work to do.

This is going to be a good read and I am excited to bring you all along with me on this journey. I hope you all will receive the insights and comments from Rabbi Ruttenberg with an open heart and mind as we seek a way forward while living in rhythm. God’s grace and peace be upon you all.

In Christ’s Service,
Pastor Eddie

⁹ Ruttenberg, Danya. On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World. Beacon Press, Boston, MA; 2022. p.8

¹⁰ *ibid* p.9