

Theological Themes and Apology Disjoining of Deaconesses and Limiting Married Ordained Women

Authentic apology goes beyond the mere words, “I am sorry”, or, “We are sorry”. Very often Jesus points to the necessity of a *process* for embodying the gospel message of forgiveness, repentance, and change. He demonstrates that to be truly changed requires a relinquishment of power and an expression of vulnerability. This letting go is the only way to make space for more just relationships and structures. The results of this work are great, yet the work can be difficult. Jesus also demonstrates grace and generosity. He is asked, “How many times do I have to forgive?” to which he responds, not seven but seventy seven times. (Matthew 18:21) This recognizes that human relationships are such that reckoning wrongs may take many efforts. The gospel partners a theology of grace with those of forgiveness, repentance and change.

- Read the quotes associated with your assigned theme
- What would it mean to intentionally and faithfully embrace this theological theme vis a vis the history of disjoining of Deaconesses/and limiting Ordained women?
- For a report back, share a symbol or symbolic action which captures some of the insights from your conversation.

Lament

Lament embodies the act of questioning the injustice of it all, especially in the face of injustice which is so tenacious or insidious that it seems overwhelming. Lament surpasses grief and regret, expressing deep sorrow and often anger. Scripture assures us that “Blessed are those who weep and are in emotional turmoil; they shall be returned from their wanderings.” (Matt 5:4, Aramaic rendering) It can be hard to keep faith in that prediction. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann concludes that when lament is lost, minimized or forgotten one tool to redress power imbalance is silenced and the status quo is maintained. ⁱ

Truthing

Speaking the truth and listening for the truth is risky. Truthing reveals what must be left behind when turning to the new. Truth remains elusive as it is always conditioned by the stand point of the proclaimer. In the same way that Virginia Ramey Mollenkott speaks of god as a verb rather than a noun, truth might best be thought of as a verb: so truthing rather than one set truth.ⁱⁱ Using the phrase ‘truth telling’ David Crocker echoes this idea. He writes, “to meet the challenge of reckoning with past atrocities, a society should investigate, establish, and publically disseminate the truth about [the atrocities.]”ⁱⁱⁱ It is a moral obligation. Truth is comprised of more than who, what, and where; truth is also revealed through analysis and theorizing.

Confession

Confession means to recognize, with a spirit of contriteness, humility, perhaps even shame, that one has been involved in an injustice; that one has wronged. Confession expresses failure, inadequacy, brokenness. The perpetrator is most vulnerable and open during the time of confession and this vulnerability is an essential element in effecting true change. Public and corporate confession marks that a community shares accountability for the actions of all the parts of the whole. Confession is a relational act, involving God, as well as the human parties. In the context of an apology, the “speech act” of ‘I’m sorry’, has potential to tangibly signal the perpetrator’s inner discovery and indicate the sincerity of the confession. In this way confession is sacramental, the outward sign of an inner mystery.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is a freeing experience, providing release and opening space for change in both the one offering the forgiveness and the one receiving it. Forgiveness is a key stage in repairing the ruptures in the conventions (implicit) and covenants (explicit) that establish and sustain a community. Core to Christian doctrine is the belief that God grants forgiveness. The extension of this forgiveness as grace, given without being earned, is a belief of the United Church. God grants forgiveness, it is up to us to do something with it. Forgiveness can be the first moment in a right relationship in which the perpetrator and victims acknowledge that they can work together toward embodying change. In an apology to a group there is a question of who offers forgiveness. Careful attention must be paid to establishing the expectations of those who represent the offended or the act is shallow.

Reconciliation

Reconciliation is made real in forward looking reform and longer term developments addressing cultures and structures that perpetuate the wrongs or similar wrongs. This includes addressing foundational issues such as sexism, heterosexism and racism, as they are observed in the present. Victims of injustice often experience the commitment to make things better into the future as a deep satisfaction and assurance that there has been a true hearing and sincere understanding of their suffering.^{iv} Only from a reconciled position can the wrongdoer and the wronged determine what the priority is for compensation or restitution. God is one of the parties in the process, and the consciousness of this differentiates the processes of a faith community from secular ones. God calls humanity into covenantal relationship, with a promise of trustworthy steadfastness.

Metanoia

Metanoia is a profound spiritual transformation or conversion. Traditionally the experience is framed in terms of being born again. This metaphor captures the depth of the transformation, and is indicative of the effort, and pain, which often accompany it. Metanoia is also described as the action of *turning to* something new. This image surpasses and surmounts the experience of repentance, which is to *turn away* from the old. Joan Chittister declares that this kind of conversion changes one's imagination; she suggests that it leads to an *embodied* ability to experience the world in more than one, self centred, static way.^v Metanoia cannot be claimed if there is no embodied result of the change. Engagement in the reckoning of wrongs should take individuals, and corporate bodies onto a new path. Metanoia is not an intention, it is an achievement. As resurrection people Christians believe metanoia is always a possibility.

The text is taken from Caryn Douglas, *A Story of Lost Opportunity: The Apology to Deaconesses Disjoined by The United Church of Canada*, Chapter pp 81-97. This thesis and additional information on the experience of Deaconesses who were disjoined can be found at <http://uccdeaconesshistory.ca/disjoining-2/disjoining/>. November 2012.

ⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1995), 4.

ⁱⁱ Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Goddling: human responsibility and the Bible* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Crocker, "Reckoning With Past Wrongs: A Normative Framework," 44-46.

^{iv} David Crocker, "Reckoning With Past Wrongs," 53.

^v Joan D. Chittister, *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 25.