



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
 Asheville, North Carolina
 24 March 2019
 Sermon: Repentance Again?
 Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Isaiah 55:1-9
 Luke 13:1-9

“White people are exhausting”: the title of Austin Channing Brown’s first chapter in her memoir *I’m Still Here*.¹ And, I found the title funny, because, I do, in fact, find myself exhausting at times, but honestly I didn’t quite know what she meant. But, after that book, I then read the top 28 self-justifications that Robin Diangelo, author of *White Fragility*, hears when she gives her white participants feedback on their racist actions, and I realized, yes, white people, myself included, can be exhausting.² Here is the list of self-justifications Diangelo hears when she talks to white people about racism. Let’s see if you feel just a bit exhausted when they are all done. White people say:

- You are judging me.
- You don’t even know me.
- You are generalizing.
- I already know all of this.
- It’s ok, I know black people.

¹ Austin Channing Brown, *I’m Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness* (New York: Convergent, 2018).

² This list can be found in Robin Diangelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s so Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

- I marched in the sixties.
- Well, that is just your opinion.
- I disagree.
- It's not about race. The real oppression is class.
- You're just being elitist.
- I just said one little innocent thing.
- Some people find offense where there is none.
- You're not teaching this the right way.
- You're playing the race card.
- This is not welcoming to me.
- No, you're the one being racist against me.
- You are making me feel guilty.
- You hurt my feelings.
- You misunderstood me.
- I don't feel safe.
- The problem is your tone.
- I can't say anything right.
- That was not my intention.
- I have suffered too.

Each of these phrases seeks to change the subject when racism comes up. They move the topic away from racism and toward self-defense, changing the subject, trying to argue that the speaker isn't a racist, but rather a good person. And that is exhausting. It can be exhausting to people of color tired of hearing white people trying to change the subject, but it's also exhausting to white people ourselves, because trying to prove yourself is exhausting. When you grow up white in this country, you can't escape racism, because you are brought up in a world that tells you, in countless ways, that white people are superior. But a lot of the time, we deny that we grew up in such a world with these messages all around us. And so, instead of looking at our upbringing critically, instead of looking at ourselves

responsibly, it seems most white people would rather argue. “No, I’m sorry. You’ve got me all wrong.”

In the middle of a meeting of our racial justice book series recently, I was complaining about my own exhaustion. I was talking about how hard it all seems, that no matter how much work you do around race and racism, it’s never done. No matter which way I turn, I always seem to fall over my blind-spots, my racism, my privilege. Even after all this time, after helping lead these conversations in our church now for years, I still trip up, and I was tired of it. So, I’m complaining to the group about being exhausted with myself, and one of our participants said something that has really stuck with me. She said, “You have to let that go. It’s not about arriving and finally getting it right. In fact, it’s not really about you.” And, in honesty, to be a white male, only child, first generation college graduate, first generation minister, to be told it’s not all about me was a bit disorientating. ‘Wait, it’s not about me? Are you sure?’ But then I saw that I was putting my energy into the wrong place. Turning my focus away from the systems and histories of racism all around me, I was busy trying to justify to myself that I was a good person, or rather, I was feeling guilty that I wasn’t as good as I thought I was.

Do you ever wear yourself out by justifying yourself to others, to yourself?

Or do you get tired comparing yourself to others?

Are you sick of blaming yourself, shaming yourself, berating yourself?

How much energy do we expend trying to convince ourselves or others that we are good, or even more, that we are better than others, more moral, more smart, more woke, harder working, more pious, more cool, more down? These are the patterns that lead to exhaustion, to burnout; they are stops along the road to resentment. These self-justifications are the patterns that will make us want to give it all up.

Where are you putting your energy these days?

And then we come to this gospel lesson for today that sounds like it was written just for Lent in the most stereotypical way. It reads like it was written for a Lenten season of feeling like you're not doing enough, a Lent of self-flagellation and guilt – in this season of repentance. At the end of a long speech, Jesus takes a moment to comment on a recent series of tragedies: Pilate's massacre of the Galileans and the tower of Siloam falling on eighteen passersby. "Do you think they were worse sinners than everybody else, since these calamities came upon them?" asks Jesus. "No, of course not," he said, "*But unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.*" Then he takes up the image of a fig tree. There was a landowner and a gardener. The landowner approached the gardener, saying "You know, it's been three years, and still no fruit from this tree. Let's just cut it down and plant something else." And the gardener answers, "Well, hold on, let me give it a bit more TLC, some fresh fertilizer, a new way of collecting water. Let's see if

that works, if not, then yes, let's cut it down." Again, the message is clear. The fig tree is a believer who must repent. And show the fruits of repentance. Otherwise, "You will all perish."

Reading this text, I find myself again in the loop of self-justification, of proving myself. I want to say, 'Well, hold on. What do you *mean* by repentance? Surely in this modern day, repentance means living a good life, being kind to others, giving of my time and resources.' I feel those familiar feelings of defensiveness, and I realize, when it comes to Jesus, I'm often tempted to change the topic of the conversation, to proving myself instead of looking at what needs to be done.

And I think about Grace Covenant. I find myself challenged as a part of this congregation. I keep finding myself in conversations and classes where we struggle together, and what we learn as a group is always somehow deeper than what any one individual brought to the gathering:

- In a Sunday school class where we are reading the Black Liberation Theology of James Cone
- In a racial justice book series where we have read, so far, 19 books about race and racism together
- In another Sunday school class called religious wounds and healing, where 25 of you took turns being vulnerable, talking about where you have been

hurt by communities that were acting in God's name, and how you have found wholeness

- I think of The Power and Race Team; The Creating Sanctuary Team; The Padrino Partnership; The Earth Team; The Gardeners; The Presbyterian Women; The Guatemala Committee;
- I think of the Serve Council, who has worked throughout the calendar year to ensure that our church is engaged with 41 ministry partners in and outside our community, so that we can learn from them, from you, so that we can be in dialogue, so that we can support the work that our partners do as they touch countless lives.

I have learned so much in the 2 years since I became a part of Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church.

So when I hear the words of Jesus, "*But unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.*" I start to feel defensive. But look at what we are doing! Where we are heading. What does your call for repentance ask of me? What does it ask of us?

So I turn to the Isaiah passage for today, which seems so different from Luke's passage but as we look at it, we'll see, it's really just another side of the same coin:

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come buy and eat! Come buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.

Isaiah is talking to the Jews who were struggling at the very end of their exile. The nation that had forced them into exile was Babylon, and Babylon at the time of this writing, was at its end. So the Israelites saw the prospect of returning home, back to Israel.

But there's comfort in the familiar. You know, you can get caught up in systems and patterns that drain you, that treat you less like a person and more like an object, you can get so caught up in a market system, in a job, in accumulation, in toil, that you have trouble with shaking yourself free. "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?" Do *you* spend money on that which is not bread, your labor for that which does not satisfy?

What God is offering here is a different way. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord." I worry, that when my first inclination is toward self-defense, toward explanation, to justification, then I am laboring for that which does not satisfy. I'm caught up in a familiar loop, where I can spin myself out all day, worrying myself to death, making sure that everyone I know believes I am good enough, making sure that I believe I am good enough.

And that is exhausting. That is something that is not bread, labor that does not satisfy.

What does repentance mean to me, now? What does it mean to you? To Grace Covenant? In Lent, we talk a lot about repentance. We strip the sanctuary bear of paraments; we take off our stoles; we hold back from saying ‘Alleluia’; we sing Kyrie Eleison, Lord Have Mercy; we sit together in silence. We think of the things in our life that hold us back, that get in the way, that distract us from the God who walks beside us.

These practices, these sacrifices, these things we have put down, our repentance along our Lenten journey. The true gift inside of repentance is not guilt, not self-hatred, but grace. The other side of it all is grace.³ I know, we’re not supposed to talk about grace too often in Lent, lest we run too quickly to Easter morning, lest we settle for cheap grace that makes us feel good but doesn’t mean anything, doesn’t change your or my life, but grace is always beside us on our Lenten journey.

And grace is that moment, that realization that when you stop the self-justifications, the arguments, the comparisons, when you stop arguing with

³ I am thankful to David A. Davis’s helpful commentary in picking up the complex connection between grace and the church’s Lenten practices through this lectionary text. See Joel B. Green et. al (Eds). *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year C, Vol. 1.* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 63-65.

yourself that you are somehow exempted from the hard, self-reflective work that we are called to, when we stop excusing ourselves from our complicity with the white supremacist-heteronormative-capitalist-patriarchy in which we are all born into, it's that moment we find we don't have to exhaust ourselves in a death-dealing loop of self-justification. Grace means you can lay down the façade, the fantasy that you and I are always right, that we have to prove ourselves as better than or perfect.

And grace is more. Grace is also in the moment when we stop spinning ourselves in such circles, and we then find that God is actually calling us to something so much more freeing, more satisfying than any excuse or exemption could ever deliver. We find we are called, and called again, and called again, to God's life giving work in this world. Let me, let us, stop exempting ourselves from the hard work of following Jesus in this unjust world. Let us get back to work.

In other words, "Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters." Amen.