

The Book of Common Prayer is a magnificent worship tool, rightly regarded as the cornerstone of our common worship together in the Episcopal Church. Within that red-bound tome you can find prayers and services for all occasions - rhythms of daily prayer, reading the scripture, as well as the Church's official position on many positions of theology.

I encourage all of you to flip through a BCP at your leisure - you may find something new and marvelous in there, or at least something of interest.

For a certain kind of church nerd the marginalia in the BCP—notes on correct liturgical practice and pastoral questions—are fascinating. Others seem to come from an entirely different era. Take, for example, the so-called Disciplinary Rubrics on page 409, which instructs clergy:

“If the priest knows that a person who is living a notoriously evil life intends to come to Communion, the priest shall speak to that person privately and tell him that he may not come to the Holy Table until he has given clear proof of repentance and amendment of life.

This is exactly the kind of passage that awakens something inside a certain kind of seminarian, the whiff of an older kind of clerical power that has would-be priests waiting on tenterhooks for that notorious sinner to come walking through the door so that an amendment of life can be commanded. And so, aware of the danger, each and every liturgical instructor I ever studied under called our attention to the line immediately following these dire directions, the one that insists that in all such cases the priest is not to act without first consulting with a bishop.

Our professors repeated these instructions, pinning us against the wall if they had to, until we got it through our thick seminarian skulls that it is not our place to decide who is and is not worthy to come to the table of God.

This kind of instruction is necessary for many reasons, not least of which is that some of the worst kinds of clerical abuses come in the guise of judgmental correction. There is an ugly history within the church of the human desire for power masquerading as concern over correcting sin. We have all experienced it, directly or indirectly: the silk-gloved fist of concerned grievance wielded against the outsider or the stranger, a means of enforcing a very human kind of control.

And even those of us who would never coerce or manipulate can still be guilty of thinking ourselves pure and spotless in our Christian life together. If we restrict worship to the virtuous then our churches are going to be entirely empty. The churches are there for the sinners. If that

weren't true then none of us would be sitting here today. The purpose of the church is not to drive the sinners out but to draw them in. For there is healing work to be done at this table and it is not for us to bar those who come seeking that healing.

The stereotype of those judgmental Christians—commanded over and over by the Lord not to judge and yet driven to exactly that kind of judgement—is very much with us as we sit with our Gospel this morning. Are we truly called to confront sinners, drag their faults before the church, and then cast them out if they refuse to repent?

This conjures up that fear of bad-faith moralizing, the kind that seeks to dominate and ostracize when someone falls afoul of the in-group. But this is not what Jesus calls us to do here. For we are called not to lash out at our fellow believers, to show that we are better than them, but to come to them as fellow sinners in search of healing and redemption.

For if our churches are to be a place of healing we must be honest about the presence of sin in our lives and the lives of others. Too often in our fear of judgement we make ourselves entirely unable to recognize sin at all. We adopt a live-and-let-live attitude and thus mute the witness we are called to give to a sinful world.

That witness is a sacred calling, part of the baptismal covenant we entered into. And so it must be approached with care and humility. For to see sin clearly is to seek after the presence of God, the God who blots out that sin with the power of divine love.

Notice how Jesus frames the process of calling out sin. It is an act not of individual superiority but of community, first a repairing of relationship between individuals and then a restoring of relationship within the group.

Sin, at its core, is a breakdown of relationship. Through sin we set ourselves apart from the law of God and in so doing also set ourselves apart from each other. And the truly insidious thing about sin is the way it turns in on itself, dragging us down into a whirlpool of compounding error. So it is that even an attempt to name sin and call it out can itself be an expression of pride and control rather than an act of love.

So it is when we set ourselves apart. But it does not have to be this way! Jesus calls us to act in community, to bring God into the picture rather than separating ourselves from divine love. “For when two or three gather in my name, I am there among them.”

It is no accident that this declaration—so well known, so often repeated—comes after this discussion of addressing sin. To seek to heal others is to seek to heal oneself. We come to this place in search of a healing that only God can provide.

God is here, present among us at this moment. The Church is the body of Christ—it is natural then to seek to do God's work, to be the witness of God in a world scarred by sin. And we are members of that body not because of our worthiness, but because of our own deep desire for healing.

As Christians we are called to be a people of love. To love the world is to hate sin—not the sinner, a brother or sister made in the image of God—but the sin itself, the thing responsible for warping that divine image. And when we see sin in someone else we are called to an act of solidarity with that person—because we ourselves carry sin with us as well. To ignore the sin of others is to ignore the sin within ourselves, because we are all connected within the great dance of creation.

As Paul tells us, “the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”

Love, not pride. Healing, not hurt. We should not seek to exclude anyone from this holy place, for it is with Christ that we find ourselves healed and made new. And so let us never fail to name sin in this broken world—not because we are set apart from that sin, but because we know that we and the world are in desperate need of God's healing love.