

Repentance: Repeat as needed

by [Suzanne Guthrie](#) in the [June 1, 2010](#) issue

The parish liturgy committee decided to adopt the contemporary version of the Lord's Prayer for use during worship. From now on, at least at one of the services, we'd be "sinners" instead of "trespassers." The next Sunday a distraught man cornered me. "You've taken the Lord's Prayer away from us!"

I was shocked. What did he mean? We'd been preparing and educating people for this small change for years. How could changing a few words "take away" the Lord's Prayer?

I thought: maybe the Lord's Prayer was not part of this man's daily spiritual practice. If it were, he might be using as many versions as he wanted in as many languages as he wanted or even paraphrases of his own. But maybe instead of praying it in his own time, he viewed Sunday worship as his own time, rather than as a gathering together of diverse and dissimilar people in continual growth and flux. After I came to this realization I begin hearing more "I" language: phrases such as "I came to get my ashes" on Ash Wednesday and "I had to get my palm" on Palm Sunday. *My parishioners were consumers of prayer!* Like customers at vending machines, they'd slide their dollars into the slot for the week's allotment of praise, thanksgiving, intercession and petition followed by coffee hour. The formulaic general confession served as the sole opportunity for soul cleansing and maintenance. There was no preparation, no aftercare, no angels rejoicing over this one repentant sinner out of 99, no fatted calf or cloak or ring, no popping of a champagne bottle celebrating a moral victory won over self.

What is church if it isn't a place to come to change, and to learn how to change with others who are changing? What is sin but the refusal to change—perhaps by holding the community hostage to individual self-will? What we all needed was repentance. At our church we began responding to the need for repentance with more frequent and vibrant church parties, in the hope that these would move us toward more of a sense of "we" and away from being a fragile collection of "I's."

Parish life requires a continual practice of reconciliation, like life in a large crazy family or a monastic community. Jesus observed that it's not the healthy who need the physician but the sick. Flawed, broken, lost, stumbling people flock to church, pretending to look respectable. But the mix of people demands a continual adjusting to new information, new revelations, new relationships, new ideas—not to mention facing cultural and economic upheavals, clashes of personality, race, class and political points of view. The continual toll of tragedy, death, disease, divorce, natural disasters and crises rocks community life. Even gentle transitions and rites of passage—birth, courtship, marriage— subtly overturn the status quo. The only constant in community life is change.

So how do you help develop strategies for adjusting to continual change? How do you cope with—well, maturation? Old spiritual exercises of reconciliation lie dormant in our church body's memory. Why not use the wisdom of the past?

I've noticed an aversion to the language of confession, repentance and reconciliation. Some will seriously argue that this is due to abuses before the Reformation. But I think it's just Sloth: because we know we're forgiven, we don't bother with the process of repentance. And maybe Pride: we're so sure of mercy, we make the leap to thinking we're right all the time. And Greed: we become consumers of mercy without getting any of the benefits of progress.

These old spiritual practices meant to strengthen our character can help strengthen community. Like any art, spiritual renewal takes practice. As so many wise people say, "It's easier to act your way into a new way of thinking than to think your way into a new way of acting."

Instead of offering a vending-machine snack, we can offer one another a seven-course meal of the practice of repentance. Here's the old-fashioned way of a preparing for a banquet of reconciliation:

The assurance of hope: If you weren't assured that our God is a God of mercy, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, you'd be paralyzed with fear. If you felt you couldn't risk failure, test hunches, experiment with working hypotheses, you'd never change for the good. Of course the crummy son is going to get the ring and the cloak and the fatted calf. But did the son really repent?

Awareness: Sometimes shock drives you to repentance in the first place. Be open to the upside-down inside-out gospel-ness of Christian astonishment. Soul work is full

of surprises: late-day laborers paid in full, a pearl of great price, a prodigal's foolish dad wasting his time watching the horizon.

Examination of conscience: Did the prodigal son examine his conscience or did he just realize he couldn't digest bean pods? Taking time to explore the conscience isn't the usual Saturday afternoon pastime these days. But when you do, you careen around in a fun house hall of mirrors, seeing your soul squat and shrunken, elongated and emaciated, wobbling and shimmering in distortions of your loves and passions. After the first shock, character defects are not so frightening after all—they're funny—especially when the same mirrors surprise you time after time.

Contrition: After wasting all his fortune, the hungry young man "came to himself." He was sorry. Contrition is twofold grieving—partly for the selfishness you intend to give up but can't imagine how you can do without, and partly for the loss of the opportunities for good that you've squandered. Once your grieving leans toward the second, move on.

Confession: Now bring into words what needs to be said aloud, maybe on your knees. The son said, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son," and the boy was right, as his older brother would remind us later.

But it's not yet time to light candles and soak in the hot tub of absolution. Classic repentance requires two more steps.

Amendment of life: If I can't make amends directly to the people I've hurt, I can build something useful, or repair something else that's broken, putting my very body into the practices of my new life. The old word *satisfaction* for this step represents actions of a true change of heart.

Act of thanksgiving: Brother David Steindl-Rast says, "It is not happiness that makes us grateful, but it is gratefulness that makes us happy." Repentance is always a good excuse for a party. Fool everyone. Invite them to a banquet. If they ask, "Why the celebration?" you can answer, "Oh, the angels are celebrating, so I thought I'd have a few friends over. Because I'm changing. Again."