

Repenting with broken hearts (Psalm 51)

For many, *repent* is a hurt-filled word. That's a shame, because we need it more than ever.

by [Celeste Kennel-Shank](#)

March 3, 2025

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

Only once in my life have I composed a piece of music—if I can use the word *compose*—the main reason being that I am not a musician. But for some reason, putting new melodies to familiar words from Psalm 51 brought me healing after I witnessed the aftermath of a tragic event.

I was riding public transit, and a man fell on the tracks in front of the train and was killed. I took the rest of the day off. It was a warm fall day, so I went to my favorite Lake Michigan beach. I sat on the sand and, with no one in earshot, I started singing, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.” I sang the words over and over to the tunes I was inventing, the rays of the sun cleansing me as well.

It's not that I was responsible for the tragedy, except in the way we are all responsible for caring about our neighbors. I'm not aware of any evidence that it was anyone's fault. News reports said he was likely disoriented. And yet words from a collective ritual of repentance soothed my spirit.

In Hebrew the word we translate as *repent* is connected to both regret for our own actions and compassion for other people. It brings to mind how in English we say

“I’m sorry” both when we’re apologizing for something we’ve done and when we’re sad to hear of what another person is going through.

For those who grew up in the church, *repent* can be a hurt-filled word, taught and preached in a way that rendered it harmful. That’s a shame, since we need repentance more than ever in our society and our world—the kind of repentance that leads through guilt and feeling sorry into transformation to more fully become who God wants us to be. Not necessarily some version of collective guilt or—a frustration I have with many progressive churches—repenting for behavior we wish other people would feel bad about rather than for our own shortcomings. While handwringing gets us nowhere, it is also true that sin is bigger than any individual.

The way Psalm 51 moves from confession and self-examination to communal ritual—teaching transgressors and helping sinners return to God—reminds me of Elizabeth O’Connor’s book *Journey Inward, Journey Outward*. She describes three legs of the journey inward in community: engaging with oneself, engaging with God, and then engaging with others: “To the extent that a community has a continuing life together we are going to be challenged at the point of our illusions about the kind of people we are. ... The task is always to change ourselves—to deal with that in us which prevents our going forth to meet the other.”

Perhaps it makes sense after all that I turned to familiar words of repentance after witnessing a traumatic death, since repentance is not only about turning away from sin but about turning toward God. Our repentance can be an inseparable mixture of regret for our mistakes, compassion for others, and lament for a suffering world. We can offer all of that up to God with broken hearts, an acceptable sacrifice.