

The Songs of Sinners

Psalm 51

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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After a one-week hiatus, we are back to our Faith Questions series which will proceed uninterrupted from now until the beginning of Lent.

This week's question is another big one. The question took a few forms. What should we do when our leaders' sin? What should we do when our leaders commit an "unpardonable sin," whatever that sin may be in our current context?

Over the past few years/decades, it seems like barely a month passes without some sexual scandal tarnishing the reputation of influential Christian leaders.

Here's a by-no-means exhaustive sample.

John Howard Yoder was a prominent Mennonite theologian who wrote *The Politics of Jesus*, one of the more compelling defenses of pacifism of the twentieth century. In 1992, allegations of sexual abuse began to surface. More than fifty women told stories of Yoder's inappropriate sexual behaviour.

A few years ago, sexual misconduct allegations surfaced related to the late Frank Epp, a well-loved Mennonite pastor and influential leader in Ontario.

Then there is the story Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche, who, it was discovered, engaged in sexually manipulative and inappropriate behaviour with at least six women in France over a period of thirty-five years. How do we reconcile this behaviour with the compassion and humane vision for the most vulnerable people in our society that Vanier exhibited throughout his long life?

More recently—just before Christmas, actually—Bruxy Cavey, who is probably the closest thing Canada has to a celebrity pastor and who is the head of a network of Anabaptist churches in Ontario, was placed on administrative leave while claims of sexual misconduct are investigated. I remember Bruxy as the keynote speaker at Mennonite World Conference in 2015. He was one of the few speakers who held my then-fourteen-year-old twins' attention!

And finally, there is the story that the person who asked this week's question mentioned specifically, that of David Haas, the Roman Catholic songwriter who has been accused of a long period of sexual grooming, manipulation, spiritual abuse, and unwanted touching by a number of women.

Each of the stories above sent shockwaves through the Christian community. Each one forced difficult conversations about how to reconcile the unreconcilable, about who, if anyone can be trusted, about what to do with the songs and the writings and the good things that each person did in light of these dark and damaging actions that were also a part of their stories.

The David Haas story was particularly disturbing for many. Music touches us in deep ways, often in ways that sermons or books don't.

David Haas has written songs that are sung around the world, songs that we sing in our church, some of which I dare say are among our most dearly loved hymns.

Three came immediately to mind for me.

Blest are they, *Sing the Journey* 94. A sung version of Jesus own words from the Beatitudes. It's not surprising that this would be a Mennonite favourite.

*Rejoice and be glad
Blessed are you; holy are you
Rejoice and be glad
Yours is the Kingdom of God.*

I will come to you in the silence, *Sing the Story* 49.

*Do not be afraid, I am with you
I have called you each by name
Come and follow Me
I will bring you home
I love you and you are mine*

My soul is filled with joy, *Sing the Journey* 31. We sang this one less than a month ago.

*Holy is your name
through all generations.
Everlasting is your mercy*

*to the people you have chosen.
And holy is your name*

These are songs that I think it's fair to say have become part of the heart language of our church. I may be overstating it, but I doubt it. They are certainly among my favourites.

So, what do we do with this? Do we ignore Haas's misdeeds and callously disregard the testimony of those women who were deeply hurt by his actions, and just keep cheerfully singing his songs?

Or do we expunge any record of David Haas from our worship and our life together?

Many have understandably chosen the latter option.

You may have noticed that each of the three songs I mentioned came from older song books. Our new hymnal, *Voices Together*, was being put together as the allegations against David Haas were making the news.

Along with around a third of Roman Catholic dioceses in America, the binational Mennonite Worship and Song Committee decided not to include David Haas songs in our new hymnal.

It's not hard to see the rationale here. We want to prioritize victims over victimizers. We want to bear witness to the awful reality that sexual sins wound people in some of the deepest, most personal and vulnerable places.

We intuitively think, "Well, what if I was one of those women and I heard a song written by David Haas in my church?" It's an important question to consider and one that many of us, if we're honest, cannot fully imagine.

And yet, I had deep misgivings about the decision made by the *Voices Together* committee when it first came out and I still do.

I realize that some of you may disagree with me on this, perhaps strongly. Some think that David Haas is a hypocrite and a predator and should never earn another dime in royalties for his songs.

I get this response. I truly do. I *feel* it. The things David Haas did make me angry and there is part of me—a big part—that thinks he should suffer for his sins.

But I think that scrubbing his songs from the church's worshiping life is the wrong approach.

My reasoning runs along three tracks. The first two are more general reflections about how we think about sins and sinners. The third is more specific to the question of what to do with the songs of sinners.

First, I think we are sometimes too eager to distance ourselves from sinners, to judge quickly, to make their sin the mirror expression of our virtue.

We should always be checking the instinct that our cultural moment encourages, which is to make our morality a performance, and to draw hard, clean lines between “good people” (like us) and “bad people” who do terrible things.

We live in a world where it is often more important to be *seen* as being good (condemning all the right people for all the right reasons) than it is to actually *be* good.

There is a punitive scapegoating instinct at the heart of much of our moral discourse that is profoundly unhealthy and that I think does deep damage to our souls.

The Nigerian feminist and writer Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie recently put it like this:

The assumption of good faith is dead. What matters is not goodness but the appearance of goodness. We are no longer human beings. We are now angels jostling to out-angel one another. God help us. It is obscene.¹

Those are strong words. But I agree with her. We are human beings, not angels.

We must always stand up for those who have been victimized. We are entirely right to expect far better from our Christian leaders.

But God help us if our moral deliberations and discourse ever turn into elaborate versions of saying, loudly, for the benefit of all those who are watching or listening, “I thank you God that I am not a sinner like _____”

Second, I think the church needs to be a place where we can bring the ugly and the beautiful parts of the human story together.

I listened to a podcast this week where someone said, of the church, “Where else is it acceptable to cry in public anymore?”

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/jun/16/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-social-media-sanctimony>

To this, I would add, “Where else can we name our sins, individually and corporately, and lament the effects that they have? Where else can we tell the ugly and beautiful truth about the human condition?”

There are two truths when it comes to David Haas and his songs:

First truth: David Haas did terrible things that hurt a number of women deeply. Even though he hasn’t been charged criminally, it seems clear that he acted in selfish, manipulative, and abusive ways that caused profound wounds.

Second truth: David Haas, the sinner, has been one of the means by which the Spirit of God created beauty, healing, and hope in the world.

Can we hold two truths together, even if it’s awkward, even if it makes us uncomfortable? We’re not very good at this, as human beings. I think we need to get better.

Finally—and I think this is the heart of what I want to say this morning—all our songs are the songs of sinners.

In your bulletin over the past few weeks, the heading for this week’s faith question has been “The Songs of Sinners: What do we do with the good things that come from bad people?”

This week as I thought about how I worded this, it occurred to me that this is actually a terrible way to put it. Who are these “bad people?” Well, *all* people!

Yes, some sins cause more harm than others. No, not all sins bear the same consequences. But the bible is pretty clear. As it says in Romans 3, “There is no one righteous, not one.” “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”

If we say that we will no longer sing the songs of sinners or read their books or enjoy their art or listen to their sermons, we will have no songs to sing, no books to read, no sermons to listen to.

At the risk of stating the obvious, every Sunday you listen to the words of a sinner from this pulpit. Every Sunday, every song that we sing was written by a sinner.

Ah, but some sins cross a line, surely! Yes, in *theory*, we know that everyone who writes a song or a book or a poem or a sermon is a sinner, but some sins are different.

But who makes that call? Do we draw a line at sexual sin? Or sin that is made public?

A Barna study that I encountered this week said that close to 60% of pastors admitted to struggling with pornography at some point in their lives.²

The porn industry is surely guilty of degrading and manipulating and abusing often very young women in massive numbers. Are the sins of enabling this kind of sexual abuse any less despicable because they happen in private?

Well, surely, at the *very* least we can say that someone who does something unspeakably evil like *murder* should be kept out of our song books.

And yet, we do sing the songs of murderers. You know where I'm going, don't you? We did so earlier in our service.

Psalms 51 is a psalm of King David's, as you likely know, and if we're in the business of ranking sins, his were arguably quite a bit worse than David Haas's.

King David committed adultery with Bathsheba, but that word probably softens it a bit. In our world, "adultery" at least implies a mutual transgression.

Given the power dynamics at play in David's time, it would probably be more accurate to describe what he did with Bathsheba as rape or at the very least sexually exploitative and coercive behaviour than "adultery." Nobody says no to the king, after all.

And then, if this wasn't bad enough, David deliberately orchestrates the death of Bathsheba's husband Uriah in order to cover up his sin and to take Bathsheba for himself once and for all.

And yet we still sing King David's song of repentance, his plea for mercy.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me... My sin is ever before me... Don't cast me away from your presence... Restore to me the joy of your salvation.

These words have given language to countless women and men over the years who have been brought low by their sin.

The songs we sing, the stories we read, the Scriptures that we hold as sacred are full of the words of sinners.

² <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/minority-report/202001/pastors-and-porn>

And not some kind of abstract category of “sinners,” but real, flesh and blood human beings who did terrible things, who deeply wounded others, who should have known better, who deliberately did what they ought not to have done.

God comes to us, speaks to us, convicts us, restores us and heals us through the words of other sinners, much as we might prefer that this was not the case.

In the ninth chapter of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus is at the house of a group of sinners. The Pharisees get wind of this and demand to know why. Jesus famously responds,

“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” (Mat. 9:12-13).

Go and learn what this means, Jesus says. Think about it, wrestle with it, ponder it, allow it to sink into your bones. *I desire mercy, not sacrifice*.

What if this is what the church was known for? What if our vision statements said something like, “We are a community of people seeking to do what Jesus said, to learn what it means that God desires mercy, not sacrifice?”

What if this is what *our* church was known for?

I wonder, if we will not be people of mercy in a culture that is increasingly merciless, who will?

I want to close with a hypothetical scenario. I want you to imagine a young woman who comes to church, perhaps for the first time. It took a great amount of courage for her to come. She sits by herself, head down, near the back of the sanctuary.

This young woman has been the victim of sexual abuse. She has been manipulated and degraded; she has been casually treated as an object instead of a person. She feels broken, weary, ashamed, and alone.

The congregation stands up to sing. She can’t do it. She stays seated, but she listens. And she hears these words:

*Do not be afraid, I am with you
I have called you each by name*

*Come and follow Me
I will bring you home
I love you and you are mine*

This young woman has never heard of David Haas. She has no idea what he has done. She has no idea that well-meaning Christians have argued about what to do with the songs of this sinner.

She simply hears, for the first time, that she is loved by God. That she is called by name. That she doesn't have to be afraid any longer.

What if this song was precisely what this woman needed to hear at precisely this moment in her life?

What if it was a turning point in her story? What if, ten years down the road, she would say something like, "I was in a very dark place in my life, I wasn't sure I could go on. And then Jesus reached out to me through a song I heard in church one Sunday..."

Wouldn't this be just like Jesus? To bring healing and restoration out of brokenness and pain and sin and suffering.

This is our God. And this is our story.

It's messy, it's complicated, it's ugly and painful at times. The same songs that cause deep pain for some bring transformational healing for others. It cannot be otherwise this side of eternity, as long as God entrusts the good news of the gospel to broken, sinful human beings.

This is why I think that we should be careful about scrubbing sinners out of our songbooks.

This is why I think that we who have been shown mercy, ought always to err on the side of mercy.

May God grant us wisdom and grace as we continue to ponder these things.

Amen.

