

December 17

This year's advent devotionals feature readings from publications by Pittsburgh Theological Seminary faculty members. Today's reading comes from the book *The Pastor as Minor Poet*. It is written by M. Craig Barnes, Meneilly Professor of Leadership and Ministry at PTS and Pastor of the Shadyside Presbyterian Church. It is published by Eerdmans Publishing Company and is available through Cokesbury.com.

The reading begins on page 99:

Grace means that we receive what we need, not what we deserve. That makes it a prophetic doctrine to contemporary society, which is preoccupied with insuring that we all get just what we deserve. Anything less, we claim, is a violation of our rights. But when it comes to God, the last thing we want is what we deserve by rights. What we really want is what we need, and that's to be forgiven.

Many of those who stand in church and gently smile as they sing "Amazing Grace" are familiar with the claim that even "a wretch like me" is forgiven, although most of us are not really convinced about the wretch part. That means that the hymn is probably too familiar to still speak with its original power. Sin is anything that separates us from God and makes it impossible to believe that we are the beloved of anybody. Nothing could be more wretched. Few of us would claim that we are not sinners, and certainly none of those who come to church to sing about amazing grace. We just don't think our sins are all that impressive. But the effect of all sin, especially the sin of thinking that we are not very big sinners, is to leave us alienated from God and thus from others and even ourselves.

The only path home from this alienation is through confession and acceptance of the forgiveness that Jesus Christ was quite literally dying to give us.

Prayer

O Loving God, in our brokenness we are unable to see our separation from you. We are left alienated not only from your forgiveness, but from your love. Open our eyes and our hearts to the mystery of amazing grace in all of its fullness, knowing that in your birth, life, death, and resurrection, you offer this grace to us freely. Amen.