

I. INTRODUCTION

Thank you for allowing me to be with you all today. CGS has been a blessing to my family for many years now. My wife, Lori, and I have friendships with different people in this congregation, and our children have benefited from and loved the wonderful VBS program you all do here every summer.

My wife and I are here today because we are both counselors who love the Church and who have a number of years of experience treating trauma of different kinds. We are also grieving with you all, and are praying for healing for this community.

This last week as I've been learning about what has happened, I've spent a lot of time wrestling with God in prayer, asking questions around what you all might need from me today. I am humbled at the task of trying to speak into a situation that has such heartache and complexity. And I am keenly aware that there are many confusing thoughts, a sense of betrayal, and feelings of anger and grief to varying degrees both individually and collectively.

In my work as a counselor, I usually start by doing an assessment. This process allows me to understand how a person is doing while also trying to gain an understanding of what has happened in their story. When I do this, I'm trying to help us have a way of naming their hurt. Often this gives a better understanding of the paths of healing we might take together.

So this morning, I want to help you to find ways of naming some parts of what has happened. Then I would like to outline a general path toward healing that you all might take together.

II. THE INDIVIDUAL/COMMUNAL experience as the Body of Christ

Now at a high level, to provide an assessment of what has happened I would like to start off with *1 Corinthians 12:12* -which says, "*Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ.*"

This verse is an explanation of how we all belong to something larger than ourselves. Part of the complexity of the revelation of what has happened at CGS has to do with the fact that there's a communal impact on you all as a body.

III. THE SIN OF DECEPTION AS A CANCER

Now, the *human body* is designed to produce and reproduce cells. Most of the time, our bodies produce and reproduce cells that are healthy. However, every single cell in the body has the potential of producing cells that can become harmful or malignant to other cells. When this happens, we call it cancer.

I believe this analogy speaks to our spiritual lives well. Spiritually, we know that sin is our cancer. As Romans states, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Clearly all sin is an offense against God and all sin is serious. However the impact of sin, at least in the physical realm, is not all the same.

In the *human body*, the heart is one of the rarest places to grow cancerous cells. However, in the spiritual realm the opposite is true - our hearts are the place from which all the cancers of sin grow and spread. Proverbs 4:23 says, "*Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.*" Psalm 139: 23-24: "*Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.*"

Sin originates in the heart. Left unchecked it grows and spreads and can cause great damage to ourselves and to others. This is true both within the body of Christ, as well as outside of the body of Christ.

One thing I believe is critical to understanding what has happened at CGS is the sin of deception. Specific individuals and families have been harmed in this church body, and the church is collectively hurting because of this deception. When we are deceived by others, it can feel shocking. Being deceived by another is a betrayal and violation of trust. It often causes emotions like anger, hurt, confusion, and shame. It might leave us questioning our own sense of judgment. For no one of us wants to be deceived by another. And we often end up asking ourselves questions about how we could have been fooled, misled, or even manipulated?

Deception though usually, if not always, starts with the act of deceiving ourselves first. The prophet Jeremiah said "*The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?*" Many times *we actually genuinely* believe the things we are deceiving others with.

So how do we prevent deceiving ourselves? If we are not honestly allowing God to see our hearts and responding faithfully to his reflections about who we are, it is easy to become trapped in a slippery slope of faulty thinking, justifications and minimizing. Diane Langberg says: "*Self-deception is about hiding, pretending, ignoring, camouflaging and covering.*" When one allows oneself to remain in places of self-deception long enough, the heart begins to become hard, and it is easier to justify the deception of others for the gratification of our own desires.

The word exploiting means to use something in an unfair or selfish way. Some families here are realizing that their children were targeted and exploited. Other families are concerned about whether or not their children were. Most feel a great sense of having been deceived and of betrayal.

When we come face to face with abuse of any nature, one of the most difficult pieces to confront and heal from is an abuser's capacity to deceive and betray us.

This deception and betrayal has caused real, specific harm to some of the more vulnerable members in your church body, as well as to those who love and care deeply for them.

IV. HOW DE WE HEAL FROM DECEPTION AND BETRAYAL?

1. Deception needs to be uncovered and truth needs to be told.

First, while so often painful, we want the Lord to bring to light the evil that has happened in the dark. The Lord has already brought pieces into the light and I imagine more will be brought to light in the weeks and months to come. This is painful but necessary. Over the long term less painful than if it continued to be hidden. Deception has to be brought into the light so that truth can be told. And it is only the truth that can heal and set us free.

1 Corinthians 4:5: *“He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart.”*

It is ok to have questions and want answers. Telling the truth requires transparency so that trust can be restored. This will mean looking back to understand what has happened, so that you all can move forward with humility and accountability.

2. Grieve Together

Second, you all must grieve and lament well together. Romans 12:15: *“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”* And Galatians 6:2 says, *“Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”* There are some who will be experiencing what happened as a trauma, others who will be experiencing it as a source of grief, and some who will be experiencing it as both.

My encouragement to you all during this time is to listen well to each other. Even when you might disagree with each other regarding your experiences. Reflect first on how you believe Christ would want you to enter into the experiences of someone when they are different from yours.

3. Pray for God’s Justice and God’s Mercy while continuing to walk humbly with God. Then when you have discerned what God’s Justice and Mercy should be in this situation, be faithful to doing it.

What is currently happening with the perpetrator is the beginning stages of earthly justice. God is able to execute mercy through judgment. Justice is necessary in order to increase the safety of this community, as well as the communities of others. Do not let your own shame, nor the deceitfulness of believing that not doing justice would be better for the body Christ, prevent you from actually pursuing justice. Rightly ordered justice is the only way to experience God’s mercy when one has been harmed by another.

For some it will be easier to pray for mercy, while for others it might be more challenging. When it is difficult to pray for mercy for others because of the harm done to us, it is helpful to meditate on the mercies that we ourselves have received, as well as how Jesus prayed for mercy for us even as he was the bearer of our cancers.

4. Pray for healing for all here, and join in the healing process when appropriate.

I am certain that many of you are praying for healing the community already. If you have not, then I would encourage you to begin doing so. Continue to pray that God would bring the darkness to light in the life of the perpetrator, that this person would come to a place of genuine repentance. Pray for each other, that you all might know the healing of Christ in your places of hurt, confusion, and betrayal.

Continue to do the good work of bringing comfort to each other in the midst of your hurts, knowing that there are wounds that are going to take time to heal. For some, right now, coming to CGS represents a place of confusion. It has been a blessing to them, but it also now a place where harm may have happened to some of their most beloved. Pray for healing for them and for their families where evil has worked its way to do harm to good. So that the goodness of this place might be restored to them.

5. Finally, Work to Restore and Increase Safety.

When working with people who have experienced trauma, one of the most foundational requirements to have a good healing process is to establish safety. I believe that to be true in this situation as well. This means working diligently for the safety of both the body and the heart.

Steps that have been taken to increase Physical Safety have meant that the perpetrator has been physically separated from your community. This person can not be on the premises of the church. Physical safety has meant taking steps towards increasing the physical safety of the building, and following the safety policies for the protection of your children. Physical safety has meant the church contacting Law Enforcement and letting you all know so that you all can partner together in keeping your community safe.

Emotional safety has meant informing you of the harm that has been done to the degree that has been recommended to so. Unfortunately, this is painful. But allowed to linger or be covered up, would only decrease the emotional safety of this church. Emotional safety has meant calling you all to lament the harm done to your community. Emotional safety has meant providing spaces to discuss and process your experiences where you feel the safety to be honest. Emotional safety means honoring the privacy and hearts of those harmed so that they might be able to grieve with dignity.

Yet, there is a long journey of healing ahead. So now I would like to invite you into this conversation.

Prayer for Healing: Heavenly Father, we come before you with our hearts burdened by the wounds of sin. You are the great healer, and we place our trust in your loving and healing hands. Grant the church of CGS strength to endure this trial and the courage to face each day anew. Pour out your healing grace upon this body. May your peace, which surpasses all understanding, fill the hearts of those here in the midst of this storm. In the midst of places of weakness, and hurt, be their strength. Show yourself to this community through both your great justice and your generous mercy. May those here feel the regular presence of your Spirit as you love and sustain them. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What are some of the first thoughts that come to your mind when you think of this last week as it relates to CGS?
2. How are you feeling about what has happened right now?
3. What do you believe this church needs in order to heal?
4. Are there other things that you believe we need to do in order to increase physical and emotional safety? If so, what are they?
5. Do you see God at work even in the midst of such news?