

# Preaching Repentance

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What are some of responses or feelings when we hear the word repentance: sorrow, remorse, regret, fear (when the end is coming soon)? It comes from the Hebrew *shuv*, which means to turn or turn around. Repentance means giving ourselves another chance, mending or repairing what might be broken, finding what is lost, building bridges on what has been severed. It is a reminder that we have to say "no" before we are able to say "yes" to what needs to be done. So we challenge our listeners to ask themselves what they need to say "no" to before they say "yes." This challenge can be very demanding and painful for them as well as us at times, but most freeing and peaceful.

Repentance means letting go or putting aside what is sinful or wrong no matter how difficult the cost. It is

comparable to standing in a dark room knowing you need to open the door to bring in the light. But unless one turns the knob no light will come in, and we will continue to be imprisoned in our own darkness. Repentance is not the fixation on self but on another, or being preoccupied with sin, but rather lies beyond, a new experience of freedom. Repentance has to clear the way for a new future, not a repetition of the past.

Repentance does not deal with abstractions but concrete transgressions; otherwise we end up straining the gnat and swallowing the camel. Some people will acknowledge their petty sins for repentance, rather than those offenses which cause them deep shame or even tears. Peter experienced this when he denied Jesus three times, and then saw the pain and compassion etched on Jesus' face. This experience probably

stayed with Peter for a long time. Luther and Calvin believed that repentance continues until one's death.

True repentance can be spiritually and emotionally draining or strenuous. It might cause the fatigue that Jacob experienced while wrestling with an angel. But the joy, peace and happiness that follow are truly rewarding. It is the door leading to new life, a fuller and more abundant life that Jesus promised. (Jn. 10:10)

## Scriptures

Repentance is brought out forcefully in the scriptures. We read "provided that you and your children return to the Lord, your God, and heed his voice with all your heart and all your soul, just as I now command you." (Dt.30:2) Returning implies turning away from sin and turning to God. Jeremiah states, "If you wish to return, O Israel, says the Lord, return to me. If you put your detestable things out of my sight, and do not stray." (4:1) He also said, "You have disowned me, says the Lord, turned your back on me." (15:6) Turning and sin are often allied or interwoven much like doing wrong or doing right. Isaiah proclaimed, "Let the scoundrel forsake his way...Let him turn to the Lord for mercy, to our God, who is generous in forgiving." (55:7) Cain kills Abel because of his jealousy. God asks him, "Why are you so resentful and crestfallen?"

If you do well you hold up your head; but if not, sin is a demon lurking at the door; his urge is toward you, yet you can be his master." (Gen. 4: 6-7) So it is possible to overcome the evil with God's help.

Rabbinic Judaism does not believe as we do in original sin. But they maintain we have a strong tendency toward jealousy or violence present in our society, so we need to turn to God and do what is right. Jealousy continues to spawn violence in our world, and hence the need for repentance.

John the Baptist proclaims forcefully a baptism of repentance, but not from some kind of disaster. Rather it prepares the way of the Lord. His baptism was only the beginning of "one mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the tongs of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (Mk. 1:7-8) The Spirit hovered over the waters in the creation story and a new birth resulted. John also wanted to see some results and "said to the crowds who came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce good fruits as evidence of your repentance; and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.'" (Lk. 3-7-8)

Jesus' ministry was inaugurated by John the Baptist and he also proclaimed, "This is the time of fulfillment

ment, the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel." (Mk. 1:15) Jesus made it clear that "I did not come to call the righteous but sinners." (Mt. 9:13) We don't offer God our righteousness but our repentance. He also said concerning the Messiah "that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem." (Lk. 24:47)

Jesus used many parables to bring our repentance. The most outstanding is the prodigal son story, or maybe it should be called the prodigal father story. It is the father who is always waiting for the son to return and runs out to greet him. The son came to his senses and returned. But we need to preach that we are not instrumental in repairing relationships but God is. It is not our doing, but we cooperate with a loving, compassionate God. Frederick Buechner expressed it well, "To repent is to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, 'I'm sorry', than to the future and saying, 'Wow!'"<sup>1</sup>

## Turning

Repentance implies a turning away from God, which is the root problem, and a turning back to God. This double action is found in the Hebrew

Scriptures depicted in rebellion and then returning to God. Hosea says,

"Return, O Israel, to the Lord, your God, you have collapsed through your guilt. Take with you words, and return to the Lord." (14:2-3) The prophet Joel declares, "Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning." (2:12) This is most challenging because we often want to hide our sin, or find it easier

to say repentance than to do it. Automatically we recoil from the call to repent as is brought out by the prophet Malachi, "Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. Yet you say, 'How must we return?'" (3:7) Or John the Baptist who tells the crowds to repent and then they ask, "What then should we do?" (Lk. 3:10) John makes it very clear what they are to do. The same question was asked after Peter gave his dramatic sermon at Pentecost. Peter responds, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38)

Standing still for any length of time is almost impossible. We find our bodies turning or wanting to turn. We follow light, sound or any motion with our eyes as our heads turn. Watching a tennis match or a ping pong game demands turning our heads. When a baby cries in church notice how people often turn their attention to the sound. Don't most preachers

have to slow down or pause until heads are turned around?

So we turn from something to something, a shifting of focus as well as action. The Israelites were invited by the prophets to turn from false idols and abominations to the living God. We turn from broken or lost relationships to life-giving ones or a new direction. Adam and Eve did not turn away from the forbidden fruit and had to suffer the consequences. Turning back from a wrong path or a dead end street is challenging. We would rather revert to our former ways than convert. We turn from darkness to the light of Christ who can dispel all darkness. The women going to the tomb had to turn their attention outside the tomb to the Risen Christ. They were told, "Why do you seek the living one among the dead?" (Lk. 24:5) We turn from what seems impossible to what is possible because nothing is impossible with God. A Shaker hymn states, "To turn, turn will be our delight, 'Til by turning, turning we come round right."<sup>2</sup> It certainly was a delight for the women to announce that Jesus had risen from the dead. By turning they came round right.

## Sin

Too often we connect sin with things rather than broken relationships. The psalmist cries out, "Against you alone have I sinned."

(51:6) We become alienated and estranged from God and others. Repentance means to rectify or re-orientate our lives to God and others.

When we rectify our vertical relationships with God, the horizontal ones usually follow. Sin instead of being seen as a separation from God has been cleverly redefined. Often sin is attributed to poor choice, some personality disorder, or some oversight. All we need is a brief pep talk, a little counseling, or some sound advice. That is sufficient. Some years ago a book was published entitled *Yes Lord I have sinned . . .* but I have several excellent excuses. We find it hard to accept blame or full responsibility. A cartoon of "Dennis the Menace," shows him in a corner being punished by his mother. He says to her, "I'm sorry I got caught. Isn't that enough?" Maybe the cartoonist had corporate and governmental scandals also included. Sorry for sin or getting caught is not enough. Only true repentance frees us from sin. This is what we preach.

Paul writes about the Ephesians being alienated from God, that they "were at that time without Christ, alienated from the community of Israel and strangers to the covenant of promise." (2:12) He preached the need for repentance in Damascus, Jerusalem, Judea and then the Gentiles. He wrote, "I preached the need to repent and turn to God, and do works giving evidence of repentance." (Acts 26:20) These acts may

be as small as feeding a hungry person, listening to a boring person, giving money to someone in need, or acting as a translator for someone who can't speak English. Paul also states, "For godly sorrow produces a salutary repentance without regret, but worldly sorrow produces death." (2 Cor. 7:10) Hebrews speaks of Esau, "when he wanted to inherit his father's blessing, he was rejected because he found no opportunity to change his mind, even though he sought the blessing with tears." (12:17)

Too often preachers focus on individual sin rather than social sin. Tens of thousands of children die everyday in the world from various diseases and hunger. We could prevent many of these tragedies with the proper use of our resources. Global warnings have been issued many times, but we turn a deaf ear, allowing greenhouse gases to contaminate our air. Repenting from our own sins is much easier than sins of society. How many shops at Wal-Mart, a seven billion dollar yearly profit, even though we know they hire people at a minimum wage and are anti-union. Many live in the lap of luxury while others live below or just above the poverty level.

Just as at one time we thought the sun revolved around the earth, now many believe everything revolves around them. Animals, plants, water do have rights. According to the creation accounts we were given the

care or stewardship of the earth. We now have casinos in the desert, paved parking lots where grass and trees used to grow, sprawling suburban areas where farms used to exist. Money has become our false idol. If we have money we have power. Shopping malls have become our icons. Our consumer society is traveling down a dead end street. We are not just a human community but also a universe community as Thomas Berry insists. He also maintains that our human world is made up of haste, hurrying, self-gratification, which barely acknowledges the non-human world. According to him we are turning Wonderworld into Wasteworld. As preachers we need to offer a simpler life style, more generosity, and a greater awareness of our environment. More is not better but less often is. This, indeed, is a challenging message.

### Addiction

Repentance resonates well with people recovering from addiction, which has grown to epidemic proportions in our country. The twelve-step program embodies repentance and reformation. Gerald May in *Addiction and Grace* views addiction as a primary metaphor that could be used for sin and alienation. Patrick McCormick, a Catholic moral theologian, maintains that addictions arise from a "denial of creatureliness." We

don't want to live or accept our limitations, and we replace God with the addiction. Moral exhortation is often fruitless to change one's behavior. Addicts need to understand more fully the damage done to themselves and others, and then accept the blame. Besides individual addictions there are social or public ones like consumerism, sexism, militarism and others. Some preachers, however, love to preach on sex and all its deviant forms. We certainly are a sex-obsessed society, and this naturally is a tantalizing topic conducive to repentance. Why not speak out against the Iraq war or on racism?

Are we ready for a metanoia or change of heart, attitude, outlook, a letting go of attachments, a real conversion? Are we willing to let go of our addiction or wrongdoings and begin anew? We often rattle off the Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy, in the liturgy asking for forgiveness. But does real conversion follow? Are we more loving, just and forgiving? Few of us change direction in one drastic moment like Saul on his way to Damascus.

So our role as preachers is to show how this can be done in small ways or steps. That is one of the reasons the twelve-step approach is so successful. When Willie Brandt knelt before the Warsaw monument in 1970 it was a first step toward repentance.

### Repent

The word "repent" can remind us of someone standing on a street corner with a placard saying repent! Some preachers, especially evangelists, proclaim that you better repent or you will be condemned. Just recently I saw next to our post office here in Milwaukee a billboard with huge letters: Repent or Go to Hell, Jesus will save you. The fear of punishment accompanies that approach and is often rejected by many. When we hear the word "repent" we sometimes fail to grasp that God is speaking to us, rather than guilt. It is a call to straighten out our lives. We all need to repent because none of us is without sin or perfect. How many of us can readily admit the rents in our garments? How boring would our world be without faultless or sinful people? We know who we are by the sins we cling to. The guilt becomes evident when we speed on the highway and spot a trooper. What is our natural response?

Jonah was asked by God to preach to the people of Nineveh because of their wickedness. Jonah fled but God rescued him transporting him to the city by means of a whale. Jonah told the people, "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed." (3:4) Amazingly the people and even the king believed God and repented in sackcloth. Could this happen today? Walter Wink believes that

every government, company, structure, institution, has a "soul" guiding its thinking and behavior. We need to acknowledge how we benefit from oppressive structures. More education is needed to understand our complicity, and then lead us to repentance. This is only the first step but a very important one.

When we feel the sin and evil surrounding us and how we are involved, lament and weeping should result. We need also to speak honestly about our wrongdoing. As Jesus said, the truth will make us free. What is even more demanding because of all the injustices and violence in the world is the need to change our way of acting. This is at the heart of repentance. At one time Christianity was considered as "the conscience of society." Now it has been accused and needs repentance.

How does a person change one's way of life or repent? Garrison Kellor, the famous storyteller, was once asked a similar question, how do you get to Lake Wobegon? He replied: "When you see white stones, stones painted white at the end of driveways, you're getting there. And when you start seeing bathtubs turned on end and half-buried and holding statues of the BVM (Blessed Virgin Mary), you've almost arrived. In fact, you might want to stop there. But when you see those Bible verses painted on the sides of barns - 'The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God through Christ Jesus is eternal

life'-then you've reached the heart of Lake Wobegon."<sup>3</sup>

Preaching repentance can be scary for some preachers because too often repentance is looked upon as a rehearsal of past failures rather than a clarion call to future ministry. God's grace urges us onward into a future filled with hope. Repentance opens God's door of mercy, compassion, and forgiveness because we say "no" to our wrongdoing and "yes" to what is right and pleasing to God. We unlock the door of our prison and bask in the bright light of God's love. Repentance is a reconnecting with God, our neighbor, and the earth. It brings a newness of life, a freedom from the past. Someone has said that preaching repentance might be as dangerous as snake handling. Are we preachers convinced of its importance? Paul was and the Jews were ready to seize and kill him. (Acts 26:21) How willing are we?

#### Endnotes

1. *Living Pulpit* (July-Sep. 2004) 41.
2. Kyrstin Granberg, "The Valley of Love and Delight," *Living Pulpit* (July-Sep.) 45.
3. Marguerite Shuster, "On Getting Out of 'Here'" *Living Pulpit* (July-Sep) 36.

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