

Lent: A Journey of Repentance

Isaiah 58:1-12 Luke 4:1-13
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
February 14, 2016

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:15)

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matt. 3:2)

"Bear fruits worthy of repentance." (Luke 3:8)

These are the words of John the Baptist, as recorded in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke, respectively. Matthew also records the same words, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near," as the first proclamation of Jesus' public ministry. In Mark, after Jesus gave initial instructions to the twelve disciples they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. (Mark 6:12). And in Luke, after the Pharisees and their scribes complain to Jesus' disciples that he eats with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus answers, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance." (Luke 5:30-32).

I think we all get the point. It is abundantly clear that **the ministry of John the Baptist and the initial focus of Jesus and his disciples was a call to repentance**. I see that as a necessary reminder to the fact that I, and many other progressive pastors, rarely even bring up the topic of repentance. **What is not abundantly clear, however, is precisely what biblical repentance entailed.**

Much of traditional Christian orthodoxy has taught that repentance is tied to salvation, meaning we better get our act together, believe that Jesus came to die for our sins, and therefore be saved from eternal punishment in hell. In other words, repentance was a necessary part in getting our 'fire insurance'. But thanks to efforts by progressive Christian theologians, we are seeking to reclaim and restore many theological terms, concepts and doctrines to the fullness of their meaning, before they were engraved in granite by the powers that be in organized religion. Therefore, **our purpose here at College Hill during this 40-day season of Lent will be to reclaim an understanding of repentance in a way that makes it a truly relevant and important part of our journey of faith – as individuals and as a community of faith.**

Let's start with the **common understanding that repentance means doing penance** for our sins and moral shortcomings in order to be in a right relationship with God. Penance is rightfully understood as some sort of voluntary self-punishment or self-denial used as an outward expression to show that we are sad or really sorry and apologetic about doing wrong. Some call these acts of contrition. And it's appropriate to regret the wrongs we have done, and the good we have left undone. **That's where the idea came from to either give up something meaningful or stop something destructive during the season of Lent.**

As a response to that, let me just state that we shouldn't need a specific church season to remind us that trying to eradicate destructive and harmful attitudes and behaviors to ourselves and others should be part of our everyday journey of faith. Repentance is much broader than that. At least it used to be.

During the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago, Martin Luther and John Calvin both sought to remove the concept of penance from the meaning of repentance. Calvin

believed that repentance continued throughout the life of the Christian and saw it as the fruit of living a life of faith. In going back to the original Greek word **metanoia**, translated into English as “repentance,” they emphasized that it literally meant to think about something after the fact and have a reversal of opinion about it. Thus for the early reformers, repentance primarily meant, “to change the mind.” With that understanding, I think it is fair to say that many of us gathered here this morning have “repented” from traditional church dogma.

Yes, it's interestingly that sometimes we have to look to the past to guide us into the future. In a letter to John Staupitz in defense of his *Ninety-Five Theses*, Martin Luther may have come closest to the New Testament meaning of repentance when he wrote, **“metanoia signifies a changing of the mind and heart, because it seemed to indicate not only a change of heart, but also a manner of changing it, i.e., the grace of God.** For that ‘passing over of the mind,’ which is true repentance, is of very frequent mention in the scriptures.”

Luther and Calvin was onto something far different than the *metanoia* understood by the Roman Catholic Church in their day, and today in expressions of some traditional Christianity. And consider this, if we have trouble translating the Greek (the written language of the New Testament) into English, imagine the complications added by the fact that Jesus spoke Aramaic. On a website named “Metanoia Ministries,” an outreach that encourages a Christian lifestyle centered on repentance, I found the following quote:

The closest word we have in English to the meaning of the Greek word *metanoia*—as used in the original scriptural text—is “metamorphosis,” or the life cycle of change as seen when the caterpillar becomes a butterfly. **If we look closely at the concept of metamorphosis we might find insight into the process of metanoia, and the importance of repentance in our lives.**
<http://www.metanoiaministries.org/Difficulty.html>

If that is indeed the case, then perhaps a legitimate expression of the message preached by John the Baptist and Jesus is this:

- **Experience a metamorphosis of your mind and heart, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.**
- **Bear fruits worthy of having gone through a metamorphosis.**

When you think about it, **isn't that the very purpose of living a life of faith – to allow ourselves to be transformed by the Sacred Presence of God within and among us?** Repentance, therefore, isn't a momentary instance of remorse, but rather a journey of transformation.

Well, this is just the first of many concepts we will be exploring during Lent in order to reclaim the call to repentance in our lives. In addition to printed liturgy and the sermon, we will also be adding something special each week – a reflection on the meaning of repentance through a candle extinguishing ceremony after the Hymn of Response. It's somewhat like a reverse of lighting an additional candle each week during the season of Advent. We will start with seven candles and extinguish an additional one each week until they all go dark on Good Friday.

Seek ways to bear fruit in your journey of repentance this week, throughout Lent, and always.

Amen.

Resource: <http://www.metanoiaministries.org/Historical.html>