

Repentance

Epiphany 3A | Matthew 4.12-23

No doubt you've heard the story of the pastor who accepted a new call. The first week he preached a very acceptable sermon. The second week he preached the same sermon, and the week after that the same sermon again. The Council President took him aside to speak to him about it. "Don't you have any other sermons?" she asked. "Oh, sure," he replied, "but nobody's put the first one into effect yet, so I figured you needed to keep hearing it."

From reading Matthew's account, you might get the same idea about this sermon that Jesus preached. "From that time," Matthew says, "Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'" It is an unsettling message — and especially if it is one that he kept repeating, again and again, as if no one was getting the point. "Repent" — that's not a word we think much about in respectable churches. It's a word for sinners.

Of course that's who's here at Hope today. You and I are sinners, and so it is a word for us. It is also the first word that Jesus speaks publicly, according to Matthew. For that reason it's a word that will not go away, a word that nags and follows us insistently, a word that does not let us escape. So let's think this morning about repentance — what it means, why it's important, what we do with it.

Let's first look at the word itself. The Greek word here is *metanoia*, and it means to "change the way you feel about something." J. B. Phillips comes close in his translation of the New Testament. He translates "repent" like this: "Change your hearts and minds." I like that! "Repent" is primarily a positive word. It does not primarily mean "to be sorry for something" or "to ask forgiveness for something" — though that may be part of it. But to repent is very simply to change one's attitude, to look at things in a new way. Frederick Buechner, following Luther, defines it as "coming to one's senses." It suggests that one has been confused about things, but suddenly one sees things clearly and comes to a new understanding. The lost younger son's 'coming to himself' in Luke 15.

You'll notice in our lesson this morning the comment that Jesus left Nazareth and went to Galilee, setting up headquarters in Capernaum. Those place names are familiar to us, but we usually don't catch all the associations. Galilee, for first century Israel, was on the outskirts of civilization. It was the land right next to the pagans, a place where life was rough and religion was often contaminated. It was definitely not the place from which the Messiah was to come. That's one reason Jesus had trouble being accepted by pious Jews — they simply were not able to "change their understanding" about who and what and from where the Messiah would be. They were stuck in their thinking; they could not see things any differently.

Now the biggest problem we have with Jesus' admonition to repent is that we don't see the need for it in our own lives. Somebody who's living an immoral life, a sinful life — certainly *that* person needs to repent, but not *us*. We're Christians, after all. Isn't repentance just a word that has to do with people who decide to become Christians? Once you've repented and become a Christian, is there any more meaning to this word "repent"?

Well, yes there is. We Christians are always needing to repent. Most Lutherans have heard of the 95 Theses, the clarion call to Reformation that Martin Luther posted on the door at Wittenberg which ignited the Protestant Reformation. But I doubt that most Lutherans have read the 95 Theses. The very first one goes like this:

*When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,'
he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.*

Luther's citing today's lesson, of course, and explaining what Jesus meant. Hear it again:

*When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,'
he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.*

"The entire life of believers." Christ willed that our entire life be one of repentance. Our entire life. Repentance is not just the beginning of the Christian life, it is the entire thing.

You see, when we follow Christ, when we pursue the Kingdom of Heaven, we are continually needing to change our hearts and minds. We are continually needing, day after day, to come to our senses. Verbal form of the verb – literally, “keep on repenting”

Take a look at the disciples as an example. Our gospel lesson this morning says that Jesus was walking by the sea and he saw fisherman, Andrew and Simon and then James and John. “Follow me,” he said, “and I will make you fish for people.” And they did! Each of the four immediately left their nets and followed him. Each repented, each changed his heart and mind; one minute their hearts and minds were on their fishing, the next minute they were fixed on Jesus. But that was not the end of it! As we watch these disciples through the gospel narrative, we see that they frequently misunderstood. They often faltered in their following. Sometimes you just want to shake them and say, “Come to your senses—don’t you get it?” Ah! They didn’t get it, did they? Sometimes there were flashes of insight, and sometimes they were just incredibly on the wrong track! And that’s how it is with us. Sometimes, I suppose, Christ wants to shake us and say, “Come to your senses!” For we, like Simon and Andrew and all the rest, often just don’t get it.

Paul’s letters to the Corinthians are filled with a similar spirit. He is writing to Christians, to people who have given their lives to Christ. But every paragraph of his letter suggests that those dear Corinthian Christians still had a lot of changing, a lot of repenting to do. Today’s passage talks about the divisions that have sprung up in the church, the petty arguments and jealousies. “Is Christ divided?” Paul demands. Of course not! Christ is one, and in Christ they must be one. So they must stop their quarreling, change their attitudes toward one another, they must repent! Because they are Christians, they must repent, they must change and grow.

That’s really the point, you see. To repent means to change, and to change means to grow. Christians of all people must understand that we are to grow, to keep growing, to keep changing. It’s not enough to say, “I’ve been confirmed” or “I went to Sunday School as a child, but I’m done with that now.” A life of faith is never done growing;

never done learning; never done going deeper in our connection to God in Christ.

Now what is the nature of this change to which we are called? It is, very simply, to grow into the likeness of Christ. It is to stop looking at things with our own eyes, our own attitudes, our own prejudices – and begin to look at things with the eyes of Christ, from his perspective. The reality of our human condition is that we just don't wake up one morning and find ourselves Christlike! Becoming Christlike takes some work and a whole lot of grace, and it takes each day to do it. Yesterday I was doing so well, following Christ so closely, really seeing things from his point of view; today I'm back again in my own perspective, seeing things my way. With me it's three steps forward, two steps back. I suspect it is much the same with you.

You know, there has always been a strong connection between repentance and this Table of Grace, the Lord's Supper. It has taken shape in different ways. In the Lutheran Church it took the form of a strong connection between confession—acknowledging our sin and turning our hearts again to God—and the Sacrament, which again was understood as a comfort for those who had confessed.

I think it works like this: The basic change in heart and mind that we must make is to acknowledge that we are in bondage to sin, that we cannot free ourselves, that we cannot do it ourselves, that we need God, we need him even to live each day. And in the Eucharist, we find that embodied. Instead of striving and struggling, we come on bended knee, with hands outstretched, ready to receive. We hear the words, "This is my body, given for you" — Christ's words that say very clearly "Let me give you what you need. Let me love you. Let me take care of you, uphold you, keep you." What words of grace to us who spend so much time struggling.

Yes, words of grace. And of course that is true of our text today, too. "Repent," Jesus says, and that means "Come to your senses! Give up your fighting! Let me love you and change you!" We need that, don't we? We need that every day of our lives.

And so, that's what Jesus offers us. Here at the table. Here at the fount. Here in this place called Hope.

Amen