

Feasting on Repentance

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Luke 13:1-9

A year or so back I received a phone call, asking if we would host a press conference regarding marriage equality. The organizing group wanted to gather a diversity of religious leaders to declare support for a change in New York State law. I said yes. I was instructed to prepare a statement for the cameras, no more than a minute in length. I did so, and even combed my hair before the big moment came. We assembled on the Meigs Street steps, sun shining, cameras rolling.

We all made our statements, a handful of them particularly articulate. In the end, though, the reporters were only interested in the statement of the Episcopal bishop. It was a lesson I learned a long time ago – regardless of anything else, media love bishops...cardinals even more...with popes at the top of the ecclesiastical media food chain! Despite this, I am glad to say that some of my best friends are Episcopalian!

I tell you of this episode, however, because of what was happening on the periphery of the gathering. A car parked on the street, adorned with posters and bumper stickers and other enhancements. A man exited, clearly opposed to the purpose of our gathering and the content of the proceeding. He was respectful, very respectful, I must say. He did not attempt to shout over the formal proceedings and statements and Q and A. He did, however, yell at the group beforehand, and picked it up again after the event was over.

And after everyone dispersed, he hung around for a long time. A *very* long time, so long that after checking on him out the window every so often, I ambled back outside for a visit. He was friendly and cordial. I extended my hand and we exchanged handshakes. He offered me a Bible. I thanked him and said that I was covered. We chatted a bit longer. I told him that though we disagreed on this issue very fundamentally, my hunch was that we agreed on a lot. I am pretty sure he did not believe that. Again, though, he was cordial.

“They need to repent,” he said. “Pardon,” I said. “They need to repent; gays need to repent.” “That may be,” I responded, “but they don’t need to repent of being gay.” He looked at me. Then I added, “I bet there are things that you and I need to repent of as well.” He looked at me again. I wished him God’s blessings and we shook hands again.

Perhaps that’s your image of repentance. An affable, or more likely cranky, outsider, railing against you or someone to change behaviors. “Repent, the end is near.” We’ve seen it many times. Movies, countless *New Yorker* cartoons, in real life. This church participated in such activity, more socially acceptable, however, now almost 200 years ago, what was called the Second Great Awakening. The emphasis was on dancing and drinking and tobacco, and an anxious and fear-driven acceptance of Jesus. There are more recent manifestations. “Candy, sex and gin.” Peter Gomes calls it.

Perhaps that's your image. And perhaps there are behaviors in your life that you need to change, even ones based on consumption or lifestyle. You know what those are, and how your life will be improved if such a change is made. And certainly God wants your life, and mine, to be lived freely and fully, as God intends, without you or me carrying around added burdens.

But just as surely, the plight of your soul, your eternal salvation, does not hinge on this image of repentance. Our understandings of grace and mercy trump fear-based and anxiety-driven insistence to repent. And surely the biblical understanding of repentance is more nuanced, more provocative and more comprehensive than that.

Yes, we are called to repent. Yes, repentance is a central biblical vision, and at the heart of Jesus' ministry. Yes, repentance will look differently for each of us. Yes, repentance must also have a communal quality – national repentance, or cultural repentance, or even church repentance. But it's nothing like what the stereotype portrays. It is comprehensive and transforming.

The Hebrew word is "*shuv*," which means, literally, turning. In Ezekiel, God tells the Israelites to "repent, and turn away from idols." The word suggests a physical course correction. An individual, or a group, has been traveling in a certain direction, the wrong direction. In modern parlance, the traveler has been ignoring the voice on the GPS. Repentance means hearing that voice and correcting the path, a course correction, a change of path, that leads to new life, new vitality, new understandings, new healing and wholeness.

In the Greek of the New Testament, the word is "*metanoia*," a new thought, a new way of thinking, perceiving of life in one way and then changing one's orientation to a new way.

The first commandment Jesus gave was "repent." It is a very Lenten theme. The devil takes Jesus away and tempts him for 40 days. At the end of the period, he comes down and begins his ministry. "Repent," he says, "the kingdom of heaven has come near."

We get a strong dose of it this morning. People around him were curious – were there levels of sins, people who would suffer *more* because of their actions. No, he said. Unless you repent, you will all die.

So we can see where we get the image of the person preaching through the bullhorn – repent or die. But Jesus does not let it stand there. Faith, he says, is a series of second chances, of new opportunities.

A fig tree produces no fruit, so the owner is ready to cut it down. But the gardener wants to nurture it and cultivate it for one more season. The tree is spared the ax. Theologically, we would call that grace.

I have always liked the "smushing" (neither a Hebrew or Greek word!) together of our biblical understandings – the Hebrew value of a physical turning and re-direction, and the Greek understanding of a change of mind, which might also feel like a change of heart. We are like that fig tree. In whatever ways you understand yourselves, wherever there are gaps, or absences, or stunted growth, or wherever you are doing things or causing things that are harmful or hurtful to others or yourself, with the right nurture or cultivation, change is possible, growth is possible, health and wholeness and healing is possible.

Alan Culpepper writes that the point is clear: “The time is short; you have one last chance to put things right before the judgment...If you do not use the time that remains...you will be cut down like the fig tree.” (*New Interpreter’s Bible*, Volume IX, pages 269-272)

I want Jesus to “take a chill pill,” as we say, cut us some slack. But we cannot ignore his sense of urgency; and, really, for some of us, or for our world, we cannot afford to be anything less than urgent. Whatever it is in your life that needs a new thought, or a course correction, probably needs it now, and not later. And whatever it is that our world needs, new attention to the environment, to those in need, to a different way of doing politics, likely needs it now, and not later.

God is a God of restoration and grace and mercy and second chances, Jesus is saying. But God is also a God of urgency and judgment. And the timing is not ours.

Beverly Gaventa writes of this strong link between on one hand God’s demand for repentance and renewal and, on the other hand, God’s forbearance. “Another year might be all that is needed,” she writes, “especially if the tree receives just a little care.” And yet “repentance and productivity are expected.” She concludes: “The call for repentance, ever timely but particularly so during Lent, plays a major role...What may give courage to those of us who wonder whether our repentance is adequate is the role of the gardener. The tree must bear fruit, but it does not labor alone. The gardener promises to tend to it and to watch over it, reminding us that repentance and reformation do not occur apart from the watchful care of God.” (*Texts for Preaching, Year C*, pages 216-218)

I have claimed many times from this spot about my lack of agricultural capacity, that I am anything but a green thumb. But I do know the value of nurture and cultivation. Whenever I have seen growth and development in myself or others, whenever I have made the changes in my own life or seen others do the same, or even when I have seen an institution or organization make the kind of course correction it needs to make to assure health and growth, it has only happened from beyond the self. We cannot heal ourselves, or fix ourselves. To change a metaphor, a mechanic once told me that a car rarely fixes itself; some illnesses simply need the attention of a physician.

What does that look like for us? What fixing do we need, spiritually or otherwise? What healing do we need? What course correction? What new direction? What repentance? And through what, or whom, will it happen? A counselor or intervener of some kind, a friend, a loved one? A new understanding prompted by a crisis? What will prompt our urgency to change?

We want Jesus to be accepting, and so he is, so that when we present ourselves, just as we are, without one plea, we are welcomed and accepted. But it does not stop there. That’s the first step, as the recovery movement has taught us. It begins there, at that moment of realization and discovery – for ourselves and for our world – that change is needed and must happen in order for us, and all of creation, to live into the vision and hope God intends for all.

John Calvin called repentance a “a conversion of the life to God” “We require a transformation,” Calvin said, “not only in the external actions, but in the soul itself; which, after having put off the old nature, should produce the fruits of actions corresponding to its renovation.”

The good news is that in the face of such an urgent need, we have a gardener to nurture and cultivate, hope for the transformation of our souls and the soul of the world. Or as the Shaker hymn reminds us:

“When true simplicity is gained, To bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed, To turn, turn will be our delight, Till by turning, turning we come 'round right.” May it be so. Amen.