

Repentance: New Mind, New Life

Psalms 63:1-8 *O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you....*

Isaiah 55:1-9 *Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters...*

Luke 13:1-9 *"...unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."*

Repentance is at the core of Christian spirituality and the Jewish/Christian tradition. Yet it is widely misunderstood and misrepresented. Unfortunately, repentance may conjure up images of fire-breathing preachers pestering us about our sinfulness and instilling fear of eternal damnation. Not quite the "good news"! This view of repentance diminishes the importance of this life and looks toward the life to come.

This is not the biblical understanding of repentance. Scripture sees repentance as a returning to our relationship with God, to our true self as those whom God created and loves, and to a right and just relationship with other people and the creation itself. Repentance is waking up to our true self, our true life, after having wandered away into illusions and pursuits that do not fulfill the life we were made to live. Central to Jesus' preaching and teaching, indeed his whole life, was a call to repentance and the living of the life of God's kingdom here and now.

The New Testament word translated as repentance, *metanoia*, literally means to "go beyond our present mind" (Marcus Borg). Repentance may include feelings of regret or remorse, but is primarily a change of heart and mind, and a change of life. The two are related. When we change our minds or hearts, the way we live changes. When we change the way we live, our viewpoint, our thinking changes. That's what Jesus was talking about. He calls us to a change of mind and a change of life, to go beyond our minds that have been too shaped by the culture in which we live.

Repentance is a very exciting and life-giving thing. It is about waking up to life as it really is and ourselves as we are really made to be. It is about our coming home to our relationship with God.

Repentance as a Change of Our Religious View

I think that religion itself is undergoing repentance today, a change of mind, a new perspective. Religious extremism, in

Christianity as well as other religious traditions, presents us with the opportunity to find a new "religious mind," as it were. When we take our own spiritual tradition and understanding of that tradition as THE truth, we sow the seeds of extremism in either a soft or a harder form. We not only diminish what others have experienced and have to share out of their spirituality but also violate the deepest core of our own faith—the ultimate mystery of God.

Look at the words from Isaiah 55. Here is a warm and inviting call from God to return to our relationship with God, to buy and eat without having a nickel. This passage alone overthrows the idea that Hebrew Scriptures are about God's law, not God's grace. Nowhere in the Bible is there a more powerful expression of God's grace.

Then there is the call to seek God, to draw near to God, and to let go of patterns of thinking and living that are not life-giving. Ultimately there is the call to a new awareness, that God's ways and thoughts are not our ways and thoughts. God is beyond the grasp of our minds. God's will is beyond any human claim to possess it. Here is a clear call to abandon spiritual pride and arrogance, and to cultivate at the very center of our being a profound sense of humility and wonder.

This is only one of many places in scripture that caution us against the belief that ours is the only way. God is neither controlled by nor contained in our thoughts and the teachings and practices of our particular spiritual tradition. A return to God is a turning away from our proud attachments to religious doctrines and spiritual arrogance to the utter mystery of God's grace and love. It means going beyond the proud and rigid mind that clings to our particular religious tradition as superior. It calls for a greater openness to the reality of God, which is far deeper and broader than any person or religion can contain.

Does this mean we abandon or soften our commitment to Christian faith and life? Not at all. It means we deepen it. We are only just beginning to discover and learn how we can be passionately committed Christians living respectfully and fruitfully with those of other religious traditions. In the Chrysalis Mission Group, which is working with our interfaith retreat center here, we are living our way into such a new understanding. We are grateful for the presence of Phil Boyce in our group, who brings his Zen Buddhist practice and spirituality. As we talk together about our spiritual lives, we are learning to do so in a way that affirms everyone's spiritual practice and beliefs. Interfaith sharing does not

mean leaving one's own path but going even deeper into it, discovering that our own deepening commitment is actually strengthened by listening to and learning from others.

God's ways are not our ways. God's thoughts are not our thoughts. Returning to the mystery of God's reality and love means letting go of our own way as the only way, our own thinking as the only thinking. If we are grounding our lives in that gracious mystery that is God, then our thinking and our living will have a humility and openness that more clearly express God.

Repentance as a Change in How We Live

Isaiah's words are a sublime and gentle call to repentance, inviting us to return to our relationship with God. The gospel reading from Luke offers another approach to repentance. It is more like a 2 X 4 over the head! Jesus' teachings are blunt and even jolting. Here is a strong call to change how we live.

Someone reports the killing of some Galileans by Pilate's soldiers. Jesus does not respond by railing against the injustice of Pilate and Roman rule, probably disappointing some folks. Neither does he hold the view that these people brought it on themselves because of their sinfulness. This is the idea that people suffer because of their sin. Jesus rejects it. Instead he says that these deaths, like all death, should serve as a wake-up call. We are reminded how vulnerable and brief our lives are. We should not waste them.

I think Jesus is saying that the reality of death offers the opportunity to examine how we are living and what we are living for. One of the most clarifying meditation exercises is to reflect on our own dying and death. When we embrace this reality what is truly important comes clearly into focus. I have seen this often in people as they lose a loved one or they become terminally ill themselves. Everything changes. One's whole outlook changes. What was so important before is seen as completely unimportant. Quite often, people who were quite closed up or negative in the way they lived suddenly become wide open and loving.

For us as Christians, this is part of what dying and rising with Christ is about, using the Apostle Paul's terms. We die to what is empty and of little value, and experience a resurrection of the true self, the self we have in Christ. We don't have to wait until our literal deaths to discover this. We can experience dying and rising every day. It is a part of what Jesus means by repentance.

Jesus tells a parable. A landowner comes to check on his fig tree and finds no figs for the third year in a row. He tells the

gardener to cut it down. It is just taking up space and using resources. The gardener pleads on behalf of the tree. Just one more year. I'll cultivate it and give it another chance. Then if there are no figs, I'll cut it down. Parables are little stories meant to open up our awareness. What does this parable say to us about our unproductiveness? What does it say about continuing to live in ways that are not fruitful for others or ourselves? What does it say about God's grace and being given new opportunities to live more fruitfully?

In 1994 the Dalai Lama was invited to address several texts from Christian scriptures before a gathering of Christian meditators in London. These presentations are published in the book *THE GOOD HEART: A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE ON THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS*. Toward the end of the meeting, everyone was somewhat tired from the intensity of the sessions. At one point, the Dalai Lama's translator was communicating a humorous story the Dalai Lama was telling in response to the common issue of our resistance to making time for meditation or prayer. We all know that resistance: I will begin to pray or meditate or study scripture when I have time for it. Or as we might put it here in our community, I will commit to an intentional inward journey when I have time.

The Dalai Lama told the story of a Buddhist monk whose pupil kept asking his teacher to take him on a picnic. The teacher always said he would do so when he had time for it. One day they saw a funeral procession carrying a corpse. The teacher asked the student: "Where are they going?" At this point, the translator and the Dalai Lama, due to some exhaustion, collapsed into uncontrollable laughter. It was several minutes before the translator could deliver the punch line: "They are going on a picnic!"

Jesus is getting at the same thing. We cannot keep putting off the things we most need in order to live life fully as God created it to be lived. Isaiah comes at it in one way, with the warm and inviting call of God to return to our true home, the deep mystery of God's love for us. Jesus puts it another way, a sharp wake-up call to stop wasting our time and our lives. Sometimes we need one message, sometimes the other. But both have to do with experiencing the change of mind and life that brings us home to our relationship with God and living out of that relationship. This, I think, is what repentance is about.