

September 15, 2013 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

The Journey of Repentance

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28 *“For my people are foolish, they do not know me....”*

Psalm 51 *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.*

1 Timothy 1:12-17 *...and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me....*

Luke 15:1-10 *“Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”*

The reading from Jeremiah may leave us with a feeling of hopelessness. Things have gotten so bad that the prophet sees nothing but destruction all around. Yet, it is not really a hopeless message. It is about facing reality and the necessity of changing ourselves. When I first really read this passage years ago, I was blown away. The prophet's words spoke to our own situation. His images of the ravaged earth and darkened skies, quaking mountains and arid land, the disappearance of the birds, seemed a portrait of what we have already done and are continuing to do to the earth, the oceans, the skies. Of all God's creatures, we are the only ones who destroy our own habitat. Jeremiah was not predicting things in our time. That is a misunderstanding of the word prophet. The biblical prophets did not predict events, especially those beyond their own time and circumstances. They spoke out of seeing things deeply, piercing the veil of superficialities and illusions, and warned that if things do not change, this is what will happen. It was not about God deciding willy-nilly to destroy Israel. The spiritual deadness of the people and their leaders had consequences, not only for themselves but for the whole of God's creation. If things continued, this is what would happen. And only in that sense is it to be understood as God's doing.

This is made clear in some verses in chapter 4 not in our reading. In verses 1 and 2, God says to Israel, through the prophet, that “if you return to me, if you remove your abominations from my presence, and do not waver” then you will be blessed. The prophet says in v. 18 that the destruction to come is not God's doing but the people's: “Your ways and your doings have brought this upon you.” Here is the fundamental Judeo-Christian

understanding of the environmental crisis and what our response as human beings must be. The earth is entrusted to us by God, and we are to be stewards of the creation of which we are part. We have broken that trust, have given ourselves to ways of living that are in disharmony with our role in the creation as well as with our truest nature. Our violence, our greed, our emphasis on individualism rather than the well-being of all, our materialism and all ego-centered living affects the earth itself. When human beings are out of harmony with life as God created it, the creation suffers. It is not God's doing, but ours. Yet the prophets always remind the people that there is hope, as long as there is a waking up, a repentance, a change of heart, mind, and way of living.

The theme of repentance continues into the psalm. Something in the psalmist's life has brought suffering. It stems from having lost the way and acted out of ignorance or greed or self-centeredness. The psalmist seeks to touch once again God's grace, God's steadfast love, longing to have a clean heart and a new and right, or steadfast, spirit. This, too, is repentance, the seeking of a life that is awake, that is truly alive, that is open to God's love and spirit. The way to renewed life and right living that is in harmony with the rest of the creation, that is open to God's spirit, is a "humble and repentant heart," says the psalmist. I like that rendering better than the translation "broken and contrite heart." The point is not to wallow in grief but to move toward new living that is humble and open to change.

In the First Letter to Timothy, Paul is writing to a young co-worker, offering advice and instruction. In our reading for today, Paul summarizes his own experience of change and God's grace. He was formerly Saul, a man of violence, a religious zealot, persecuting the followers of Jesus. He was living in ignorance and in opposition to the ways of God and of his true humanity. God's gracious love embodied in Jesus awakened him from ignorance and sleep. This, says Paul, was a display of God's utmost patience in Jesus toward him. If God can love and restore him to right ways of living, God's love can do it for anyone! This, too, is about repentance, waking up, changing directions, giving up attachments to the ways of violence and the ego. It is opening to our true selves, the persons God created us to be, the persons we truly are deep down.

Finally, repentance is the explicit theme of Jesus' teachings in the story from Luke's gospel. The Pharisees and scribes are grumbling about Jesus. He is supposed to be a spiritual teacher, but he is hanging out with known sinners. Jesus sees a teaching opportunity. He

doesn't directly attack the religious leaders for their judgmentalism and hypocrisy. He tells a couple of little parables, which he holds up like mirrors in which they might see themselves, if they are so inclined.

Jesus asks them, Which of you would not make every effort to find one of your sheep that had wandered off and gotten lost? Wouldn't you leave the rest in order to search for the one that is lost? And wouldn't you be so happy to find it that you would carry it home on your shoulders and throw a party to celebrate? That's joy. And that is how God feels when one person repents, wakes up, turns around, becomes truly alive. It makes God happier than "ninety-nine righteous persons who need (or think they need) no repentance." I think Jesus is speaking tongue-in-cheek here. Jesus had more trouble with those who saw themselves as "religious" than with those who had no illusions about themselves. Or, how about this? What woman who, having lost one of her ten precious coins, will not turn the house upside down to find it? And when she finds it, won't she throw a party to celebrate? Again, there is joy in the heavenly places when one sinner repents, when one person who was asleep awakens, when one who was thinking and living in destructive ways sees how to truly live and starts on that new journey.

I like this reading because it emphasizes the "joy in heaven", the happiness of God, the way that our repentance, our waking up, our change of mind and heart and life affects everything, even the "heavenly places", the sacred heart of life itself. It is joy because of God's steadfast, unconditional love that, as Paul says, treats us with utmost patience until we finally wake up to our true lives. And it is the joy we experience as we come to our true selves and begin living in ways harmonious with all of God's creation. This joy is at the heart of our life as Jesus' followers, and we need to touch that joy daily and express it in many ways.

Running through the readings for today is this theme of our need for change, for repentance. Repentance is not a word we cozy up to these days. It has an unhappy ring to it. It was so for me most of my life. I remember my grandfather Fleenor's funeral in a Primitive Baptist Church in Kingsport, Tennessee. I was twelve years old and very sensitive. So when the voices began to rise to a fevered pitch and the dark and fearful word "repent" was sounded over Papa's coffin, and people started sobbing, it put a bad taste in my soul for a long time.

The true meaning of the word “repentance” has become very rich and vibrant for me in more recent years. It is at the center of Jesus’ teachings and life, so there must be something very important about it. I now think that we can look at the spiritual life, as we work with it in our community, as the life of on-going repentance. Simply put, the Greek word *metanoio* means to change one’s mind or to turn around and go in a different direction. It is made up of two Greek words, *meta*, meaning “beyond”, and *noeo*, meaning “mind”. So it is “beyond mind”, we might say. A new mind, more than thinking, it is a new awareness or deep understanding of ourselves and of life. It is not just a change in ideas, but a new awareness that leads to a new way of living. So repentance in the profoundest sense means waking up. That’s how Anthony De Mello, the Jesuit Indian counselor and teacher of spirituality, put it. Repentance means waking up from our sleepwalking, waking up to who we really are and to life around us. It is not about weeping and wailing for our sins. It is about getting insight and understanding, and then living in new ways. When we see through the things that have led us to act in harmful ways, we are able simply to drop them. We become free of the illusions by which we have been living. We stop doing the things that have been causing ourselves and others suffering.

So, repentance means becoming our true, God-created selves, and letting go of all that is false and illusory. As this happens, we stop ways of acting and thinking that are destructive, and we become open to being channels of God’s love and forgiveness, as one of our disciplines says. We stop hurting ourselves. We stop hurting others. We stop hurting the creation, our own home. And we do so, in great part, because we see the truth that we are part of everyone and everything around us. Our lives are knit completely and intricately into the life of the whole of creation.

And this is what I really wanted to say this morning. It is about the deep importance of our spiritual practice, our committing to a disciplined life of faith, as we practice it in our community, and working with it daily as best we can. We do it not just for our own sake, to touch our true, God-created and God-loved selves. We do it not just for the sake of our relationships with one another and other people, to enter into and nurture a community of God’s love. We do it for the sake of the world, for the sake of all of God’s creation. When we are working as faithfully, honestly, and humbly as we can with our spiritual lives, in the inward and outward dimensions, we are a source of light and hope in the world, as persons and as a community. Each day, when we sit for our set-aside inward journey time of silence,

prayer, study, reflection, and so forth, we might say something like this--I give this time to my own repentance, my own further awakening and growth, for the sake of all God's creation.