

# “The Threat of Repentance”

A Sermon for the People of Seaside Community Church

Luke 3: 1-14

March 7, 2010

Well, here we are for another couple of weeks together! Isn't this amazing! It is for me...

We've been having so much fun together that I'd completely forgotten it was Lent. Lent is not supposed to be a time for having fun. Lent is *serious*! Don't you think Lent should be serious? Lent is the time for us to get *serious* about our personal spiritual lives and our spiritual process in our life together as church.

So I figured I'd be doing us a disservice if I didn't at least acknowledge that it was Lent, and maybe offer a couple of Lenten-themed sermons.

So this week, I want to talk a little bit about **repentance**, and next week I'll speak about what **redemption** feels like. And since I'm going to be on retreat on 3/21, that will have to do for us as far as what I can say that is Lent-appropriate.

Oh well!

Anyway, the first thing I want to do is address some of the misconceptions that we tend to have about **repentance**. One of those misconceptions has to do with the *threat* of repentance—hence the title of my remarks today. I mean to be very tongue-in-cheek about that title. I am NOT here to *threaten* you with repentance! I'm not here to do one of those “repent—or else” sorts of sermons. What I *am* going to aim to do is: so to explain why repentance is important that we all feel *invited* to repent.

Since almost none of us have been *invited* to repent before, and since even fewer of us are likely to think about repentance as an *invitation*, I also want to assure us that I do not intend what I have to say here as a kind of “guilt-trip.” Heaven knows, there are plenty of guilt-trips hanging around out there for any one of us to feel guilty. And if you are already feeling guilty at this moment—well, *you know who you are!* You don't need me to add to it.

I think one of the reasons why we've come to think about the “threat” of repentance is how repentance is treated in popular culture, especially in the comic strips. Now I am a great reader of the comics, and I am one of those people who is still mourning the loss of “Calvin and Hobbes” and “Pogo”! So that will tell you maybe more than you want to know about the level of my literary interests... Anyway, in the comics, we are always threatened to repent—because

the “end” is near—by some unkempt man in long flowing robes. Now this is clearly a stereotype, but, speaking just for myself, I’d be much more enticed to repent if the call for repentance came from a woman in a tight dress and stilettos! But then, you see, some how that does not jibe with our common notions of repentance and who exhorts us to it.

So just to stay with the stereotype, I haven’t put on a long, flowing robe this morning, but this week I did decide not to cut my hair! I am badly in need of a haircut, but I didn’t want to look too neat and trim and talk about repentance. No one would listen to me then...

I tend to think that we’ve got this picture in our minds about who can call us to repent from the Biblical description of John the Baptist. Now Luke omits Mark’s description of John as “clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and [eating] locusts and honey.” (Mk 1:6) But that’s OK, because we already have it in our heads that he was some thing of a wild man living in the wilderness, a kind of Grizzly Adams, only with wild eyes and dirty hair. In other words, John the Baptizer was a bit of a lunatic fringe sort of guy.

Over the years, there’s been a lot of speculation about whether Jesus was ever married or whether he even had any romantic relationships. And that is understandable because all of us are like Jewish mothers toward Jesus. We see him as such a *nice* man that surely some nice woman would have found him attractive enough! But we do NOT have the same sense of John the Baptizer!

I should say not! He’s MUCH too wild and crazy a guy—and not in the Steve Martin kind of way—to be attractive to any right-thinking woman!

Moreover, he’s out there in the wilderness—no house on the beach, you know—and he’s ranting a very unattractive message, “proclaiming a baptism for the forgiveness of sins.” Not exactly your Tony Robbins or even Wayne Dyer sort of person. John the Baptizer might end up on “Bill Moyer’s *Journal*,” if he could calm down and come into the city. But he’s not going to have his own PBS Special. He’ll never make “Oprah.” And even Huell Howser is not going to travel all of the way out there to interview him.

Or so we would think... But here’s the paradox: *People flock to the wilderness to be baptized by John!* Luke says that “crowds” of people showed up to be baptized by John. Maybe Huell Howser would go out there to interview him after all?

Not that John would be glad to see him! He certainly isn’t pleasant to all of the people in those crowds. “You brood of vipers!” he yells at them. “Who warned *you* to flee from the wrath

to come?” Not your Norman Vincent Peale, New Thought, Positive-Thinking kind of message, is it? I daresay that any pastor of any church who took that sort of attitude toward his or her congregation would not last long.

Yet, again paradoxically, the people in the crowds feel *cared* for. They seem to understand that John takes seriously their spiritual lives. He has their attention. They ask, “What can we *do*?” And he tells them: “Whoever has more than they need, share their clothing and food with those in need. And those of you in positions of power: don’t be greedy or avaricious! Don’t use your position for self-aggrandizement or to humiliate others.” ...OK, so those weren’t John’s words, but if he had had my vocabulary, that is what he would have said!

The response to John was, in Luke’s words, that “people were filled with expectations.” I like that. It means that John was striking a chord in people and they were resonating with his message and his baptism. We also know that John attracted disciples, so people came to him for spiritual mentoring. And we know that Jesus’ disciples were rather envious of John’s disciples and suspected that John’s disciples were getting more from John than they were from Jesus! So for all of John’s humility, and his saying that “one who is more powerful than I is coming [and] I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals,” lots of people thought John was on the right track.

Still, little of this may make sense to us. These days our image of Jesus has more akin to his being like the Dali Lama, only less isolated from children. But we do not really have an updated image of John, or a John-like personage with John’s widespread appeal, in our current culture. Even Jerry Garcia, who came close to looking like John, was not much into repentance, was he?

Which leads me to wonder: What is it about *repentance* that has got it such a bad name? Or, from the other side, what is it about US that we don’t find repentance appealing?

Well, I think one reason why repentance has fallen into disfavor has to do with the lack of hymns of repentance. When was the last time we had a good old-fashioned repentance hymn sing? ...I know. I could not remember one hymn of repentance.

Here’s why this is significant:

There was an article in the LA Times about how young people still tend to believe in God, but tend not to come to traditional places of worship because they tend to avoid “religion.” They think of themselves as “spiritual, but not religious.”

Usually, I am understanding of that life-view. In fact, when I was a hospice chaplain, I would tell people that I was there as a “spiritual, but not a religious” person. But today I want to hold up for us the general value of being religious, and the specific value of learning the music and lyrics of one’s religion.

This is why: You all know that I am going through a kind of “transition” in my life, from being a pastor and a chaplain to being a writer and a “life-coach” or “consultant.” Many aspects of this adjustment have been difficult, but this is what has surprised me. I have been surprised just how often I have been comforted, encouraged and sustained by the *hymns* that play in my head! The gospel message, as filtered and framed by the hymnody of my religious practice has been absolutely the Voice of God to me.

And I learned those hymns as a child, in church, singing with my parents in the pew. So I know and appreciate the value of religious practice—and I deeply long for that for the young people in our society.

The young people in our society who do choose Christianity tend to favor the evangelical or fundamentalistic churches. There they sing “praise” hymns that are simple, positive—and have a great rock beat! Maybe those praise words even stay with them, after they leave worship on Sunday. Maybe they keep those young people upbeat! But I have to wonder: when they face adversity, or difficult decisions in life, will they be the sorts of songs that play in their heads and can be the Voice of God to them? I wonder.

And all of this makes me further wonder why we don’t have some really good hymns inviting us to *baptisms* of “repentance and the forgiveness of sins.” What is NOT to sing about *that*?

Now, I’ve said “baptisms,” and this is where I think we in the traditional church have gone wrong. We simply do not do enough baptisms! Sometimes I think we’ve had a practice of doing baptisms for the wrong reasons. Essentially, we do baptisms to start people on the religious life. Whether baptisms are done as infants, as the UCC does, or as “believers,” as we Disciples do, we have tended to look at baptism as a once and for all thing, performed at the beginning of the religious life. Oh, we may argue about how little or how much water is required for a “real” baptism, but we hardly ever say: We ought to be doing MORE baptisms!

Well, I’m here today to say: We ought to be doing MORE baptisms! We would benefit spiritually if we took a page from John’s book and repeatedly called people to baptisms of

“repentance and the forgiveness of sins.” We know Jesus went—at least once. And maybe that is why we generally only offer one baptism a lifetime. We have no Scriptures that say that Jesus baptized anyone...

So I think we've kind of perpetuated certain misunderstandings about baptisms and repentance, and how they are linked to the forgiveness of sins. We have tended to view baptism as a one-time thing. Have you been baptized? Yes? We've taken care of repentance and forgiveness of sins, then, haven't we?

Well, maybe not... Most of us are aware that, if not the *need* for... at least the *desirability* of... repentance arises again and again in our lives—for some of us like myself, a lot more frequently than others! I have a great deal to repent for, believe me! And I don't think we are helped by our religion seeing repentance as a threat we cannot sing about, and baptism as a once-in-a-lifetime sort of thing.

I think we would be better off if we understood that repentance is a periodic *process* in which we should engage repeatedly in the course of life.

This became apparent to me during my sojourn at the Betty Ford Center, two years ago... Ok, while I let that sink in a little... I just want to add that I went to Betty Ford as a “Professional In Residence,” to study their treatment program and to learn more about substance abuse and addiction recovery. My two weeks at Betty Ford were eye-opening, for many reasons. But one of the things I came away with was an appreciation of the 12 Steps as a spiritual discipline.

I think that the 12 Steps can teach us a lot about the way the “process” of redemption works. Without going into them too much here, I would simply say that Steps 3, 4 and 5 are worth doing, even if one is not in “recovery” from addiction.

In Step 3, one turns one's life over to God (or whatever one names one's Higher Power).

In Step 4, one makes a thorough-going “moral inventory” of all of one's “character defects.”

In Step 5, one shares these with God and with another person.

I like these three steps to repentance for the following reasons:

First, when we look at repentance this way we realize the limits of our own ability to change. Repentance begins with the realization that *something* in our lives has to change... and maybe we've tried and tried and tried to change it ourselves... but when we seek to repent we acknowledge the limits of our ability to change ourselves, and instead we open ourselves to the power of God to change us. In other words, repentance invites God into our lives. Repentance asks God to play a life-changing role in our lives.

And if we see repentance as a *process*, as something that *begins* in an instant but continues on, and may take a while—then we realize that in repentance we've entered into a kind of *partnership* with God. This may not sit well with us, since we live in a world of the *instantaneous*—we don't like things to take a lot of time; we want everything to happen immediately. But if we understand that repentance begins with the realization that we require God's *companionship* if our lives are going to change for the better, then maybe we don't mind so much God's taking God' time with our lives.

Next, what the 4<sup>th</sup> Step calls a “moral inventory” works more as a kind of beginning list of what we are willing to *have* changed. By putting it this way, I mean to say that, while on the one hand, repentance is essentially a change in our way of life, still there is this *resistance* within us. Even when we invite God in, there are ways in which we still want to keep God out. It's human nature. We resist being changed as completely as God can change us.

So we make a list, and essentially we are saying to ourselves and to God: these are the things I think I need changing at this time—and these are the things that I'm willing to have changed at this time. I think that it's only fair of us to realize that when we answer the call to repentance within ourselves, we have, especially initially, a very limited vision of just how much repenting we need to be doing! (HA!) As thorough-going as our moral inventories can be, it seems to me that there is always more, always something else that arises over time or after a while. God can always make us better—if we would just *let* God make us better!

And this is why the 5<sup>th</sup> Step becomes so important. It is very difficult for most of us to tell another human being what we think is wrong about ourselves and what needs correcting! For one thing, it's embarrassing. For another, we can fear humiliation. Sometimes I think we fear the judgment of other people more that we fear the judgment of God. We may trust God's mercy—but most of the time our experience is that other people are UN-merciful. So sharing one's faults and flaws with another person, in the presence of God, takes a lot of courage.

But here's why I like the 5<sup>th</sup> Step: I like it for the "triangle" of it. I like it for the self-God-neighbor triangle of it. *Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and mind, and soul, and body—and your neighbor as yourself*, Jesus said. And what I take from that is: when we sit in vulnerability with another human being, but it is not just the two of us, and instead we are there *coram Deo*, in the presence of God as well-- within that triangle of relationships is opened a sacred space within which true forgiveness can happen. An event of true forgiveness can take place, within oneself, and between oneself and another, when God is present.

I believe that this is what the crowds of people realized when John's voice was crying in the wilderness. In coming to be baptized, they could be said to be taking these three Steps: turning their lives over to God; taking stock of themselves; and turning to John to experience cleansing in the presence of God. (I even like to think that John not only baptized them by immersion, the preferred Disciples way, but that he went under the water with them—both submerged and both sustained by God to rise into a renewed relationship with God.)

In my own life, I have come to realize that I am in a time of "letting go." One of my favorite sayings is: *We shape our lives by what we hold onto and what we let go of*. It comforts me to think that there may be some wisdom in that! But the thing is, in the course of our lives there are times for "holding onto"—and there are other times for "letting go of." Lent, of course, is a time for our "letting go of," and repentance is what we call that process of "letting go and letting God."

When I wonder why we don't have more occasions in the spiritual process of our life together as church for repentance, I'm reminded that we live in a culture that values continuous "holding on to." Acquiring is what we are about. We have a "consumer spending" economy! The terrorists don't win if we go to the mall and buy—and the terrorists are completely defeated if we carry huge credit card debt! Only now we are living in a time when we've come to realize that by trying to defeat the terrorists with our *spending*, we've actually defeated ourselves. In a spiritual world, this is one of those realizations that would lead to repentance! But our preference for "holding onto" overcomes our need for "letting go of."

Moreover, we resist letting go completely. I recognize this in myself. I have a kind of "this far and no farther" relationship with God that has resulted in my perpetually self-limiting my spiritual growth. I have come to realize that I *prefer* some of my shortcomings. I *like* some of my character defects. I'd rather *not* name some of the sins I am aware of, because if I did, then I've have to let God change those behaviors, too! However, dismal and even self-destructive

some of my behavior is, I hold onto it because it is at least *familiar*, and what would I be like if I completely opened myself to God's forgiving power? It is hard to imagine.

So, OK, here I am, back at the beginning. But I am just now feeling *why* repentance is so threatening. If I repent, I will truly have to allow myself to be changed. If I repent, then I will truly have to allow my relationships with other people to be changed. If I repent, then I will truly have to allow my relationship with GOD to change...

So here is where I am: I want to take back everything I said about repentance being about "inviting" God into our lives. That turns out to be simply too threatening, too thorough-going, too complete. Instead, I want to revive that image of repentance as being utterly consumed by sorrow. I want to hold up for us the thoroughly unpleasant prospect of sack-cloth-and-ashes for all—because I know, that if I make repentance as *revolting* as I possibly can, none of us will answer John's call. We'll stay home. We won't seek John in the wilderness of our lives, we won't be berated by him, we won't have to change our lives and share what we have with others or otherwise re-arrange our relationships. If I make repentance repugnant, then none of us will want to risk it. And if none of us risk it, then I won't have to risk it either.

Of course, if I don't repent, I'll never know what it is like to "bear fruit worthy of repentance." If I don't repent, then I won't have to be transformed by God's Grace. If I don't repent, then I'll never know what it is like to be completely and thoroughly forgiven.

If I don't repent, then I won't know or appreciate what "redemption" feels like...

But maybe I don't *know* what redemption feels like in the first place...?

Ah, but that is the subject of next week's worship!

For this week, let me just say to us all: May we open our hearts to God, so that God will encourage us to repent, to let go, to be so *empty* of ego and self-serving that we might be completely filled with the Spirit of God in our service of others.

Amen.