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From the Pulpit

Sermon ~ Jesus' First Words: Repent

The Rev. Matt Gough ~ January 22, 2012

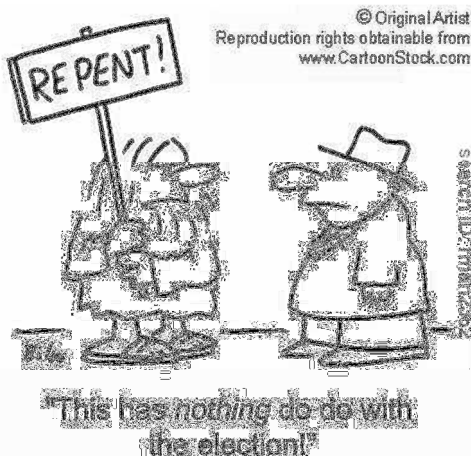
Matthew 4:12-17

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

While chatting with a seminary friend about our sermons this week he asked me, “Are you sure you want to title your sermon, 'Repent?'” That kind of thing doesn't really pack the pews.” I too hesitated as I imagined people walking up to church, and upon seeing the church marquee with the sermon title, “Repent”, would choose to do just that, turn around, and head back to their cars to go home to make another bowl of dip for the big Niner football game today.

“Repent” is such a loaded word and for each of us carries its own meaning and memories. Maybe you think of the group from Kansas who bring their hateful signs to funerals, or maybe it's an old strict Sunday school teacher or pastor you once had.

New Yorker cartoons come to mind for me because there always seems to be one with a scraggly bearded, sack cloth wearing fellow holding a sign. A recent one showed such a figure holding the sign and saying to a passerby, “This has nothing to do with the election.”



With 2012 being an election year we are already seeing many examples of finger pointing and calls to change our ways. Some point fingers at government; others point fingers at big business. And of course there

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are all the jabs and criticisms between candidates and supporters.

The word “repent” can make us immediately think of things we need to repent from, things that need to be changed, that are wrong or bad for us.

Thinking of repentance like that does indeed make it a burdensome word, a negative word. If repent only means to change our ways then we live in a world which is already constantly telling us to do so.

In Sunnyvale, we've got a few months left to change our ways from relying on these (plastic bags) to changing to more environmentally friendly bags. How many of you still have one of these (incandescent light bulb) and have yet to switch to a Fluorescent or LED light bulb? The high rate of heart disease and diabetes in the United States is alarming and could be virtually eliminated if we would simply repent from our high meat, high fat, and high processed food diet and would just eat more Kale, broccoli, and celery.

Repent! Change your ways! You aren't doing it right! We hear it from all directions these days and you could say that the movements we see around the world and in our streets are large scale movements calling for a changing of our ways, for a type of repentance.

Is this what Jesus was doing? Did he come to simply tell us to shape up? I don't say this with any disrespect to Jesus but it is not an original message. John had been preaching the same message and the prophets before him; Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos, Jonah and Micah all said the same thing.

What does Jesus, the Son of God, really mean here?

A closer look at the word “repent” shows it's not to be defined as turning from but as turning towards. The Greek *metanoia* means a changing of direction or thought.

In fact, in this simple one sentence proclamation Jesus says the Kingdom of heaven is near.

Even the prophets, who do list the transgressions of Israel, mostly having to do with how they treat other people and injustice, list them only as a symptom of the fact that that Israel had turned away from God, and had forgotten God. The prophets spent a lot more time calling people to turn towards God than listing transgressions.

We are conditioned to hear, and so often choose to only hear, the lists of things we shouldn't be doing. Turning away from all that is not right does not necessarily mean one is turning towards God.

As a parent of young children I can attest that it begins early. We have rules and we constantly have to repeat and enforce those rules, and discipline when they are broken. Sometimes I find myself in a constant mode of calling my kids to repent. "Don't stand on your chair, take the carrots out of your nose, don't sit on your little brother! Repent!"

And in those moments and others I think all parents wonder, am I doing this right? The anxiety that we aren't doing it right, causes us to live by longer and longer lists of "Thou shalt not's".

The Law of God, as Israel knew it, was all about what we shouldn't do. Eight of the Ten Commandments start out, "Thou Shalt Not".

Jesus came into a world which had a real good idea, and a long list of things we shouldn't do.

And we like it that way. We like having the lines drawn and the steps laid out. It is so much easier to follow. And it often works better in terms of getting people to sign on. It fills some churches too. We like our religion to be clear and orderly. However, the danger of reducing our faith to a list of dos and don'ts is that it allows for us to interject and focus on things that are motivated more from our own bias, our own hang-ups, and our own anxieties than a living faith in the loving God.

As we look at this passage and the Gospels and even in the prophets, we can find the shalt not's. They are there and they are helpful for us. However, Jesus has come to do so much more than tell us what to turn from.

Jesus has come to reveal to us what we are to turn to; the reality where God, not rules, reigns. The Kingdom of heaven is near! Turn around, God is here!

Repentance is a word that means so much more than changing our behavior. It is a changing of our very consciousness and awareness. When Jesus began his ministry the focus of culture was so much on the external actions and right behavior. God was said to dwell in only the holiest of places and to be tended to by pure and holy priests. Jesus brings a new awareness into this and says, "Turn from looking for God in all these rules and temples for God has found you, right where you are, as you are."

Christ comes to us where we are, in the midst of our wrongs to say, “Turn around, I am here.”

Our culture likes to keep ourselves busy and doesn't encourage a lot of time in introspection. Turning within may be a scary thought for many.

It was with me. There may be hard things to face or a fear that we may only find a vast and lonely emptiness.

We repent from where we look for God, and where we find God. We turn inward, towards the fear, towards the emptiness, towards the painful past, or whatever it may be that keeps you looking outward, and God finds you there, Christ embraces you in there, saying, “I found you. You are my Beloved”.

Jesus turns our mindfulness of all the lists of rights and wrongs and transforms it to a mindfulness of God, of Love, Joy and Peace.

When Jesus is asked what the most important rule is he does not pick a “shalt not” from the 10 Commandments.

He repeats the Shemá from Deuteronomy: You shall love God with every part of you. And love one another as much as you love yourself.

A mindfulness of God and a motivation of love change how you see the lists of rules. Jesus interpreted the laws quite different than the religious authorities. They had made them a tool to perpetuate their own bias and establish their own control of people to behave the way they thought was righteous.

When we reduce God to a list of don'ts and our faith to a set of behaviors we miss out on so much of who God has made us to be.

Jesus revealed a God who loves us freely, uncontrollably and desires that who we are and what we do flows out from that love and freedom.

I am trying to repent from a lot of things, (I've been eating a lot of celery lately) and my own tendency to let anxiety creep in and drive my behavior as a parent.

When that happens I hope I can stop and simply be present with my kids, to let love cast out the fear, and soak up as much of these moments as possible and infuse them with love. To love them as God loves them, to let them make mistakes and still be there saying I love you. To have rules, yes, but not let our relationship be ruled by the rules. To remember that love is a much more solid base to build on than fear. It's not always easy.

I forget that God is with me at times and I live by the lists and that affects everything else I do.

It's then that I need repent and turn in, maybe visit with a spiritual director or prayer group, and see that God is there. In Christ, God is with you, and dwells within you.

Whether you're clutching to your own lists of rules fearful of chaos without them, or burdened and feeling condemned by them, turn around, repent, God is near. God is right there ready to love you, heal you, teach you, give you a new awareness and consciousness and walk every step of the way with you into the kingdom of heaven.