

1. Repentance is inseparable from the kingdom of heaven.

Back to the lectionary, for various reasons...mostly to stay away from any theological pet peeves. And the topic is repentance. It would seem to be a strange choice of themes of the Gospel lesson, seeing as how we have confessed our sins not too much earlier in this order of worship for this Lord's Day, and any Lord's Day for that matter. We have already done the repentance thing, with the Prayer of Confession, so it seems to be a matter of beating a dead horse for the next fifteen minutes or so. But bear with me.

That is, take note that repenting and entering the kingdom of heaven (that is near/at hand) is part of the same sentence. It seem to be a part of the same thought. The inclusion of the two ideas implies to me, at least, that the two subjects are part of the same thought. Or more specifically, welcoming the kingdom of heaven (or kingdom of God, etc), has repentance as the method of becoming a part of it. In other words, the kingdom of heaven that surrounds the presence of Christ is not one that just exists and one just walks into or claims to be surrounded by it. To experience the kingdom of Heaven (the kingdom of God, etc), one is to act in a repentant manner.

That doesn't sound like a big deal, for it is not all that difficult, with a little remorse in hand, to say you're sorry. We learn that early on in our lives as parts of a family, or in the kindergarten atmosphere. Expressing regret to another person who has been hurt in one way or another, is a practice, and a good one, that enables relationships to be rekindled, and hopefully retain a positive lesson that is not forgotten. We are not going to get into the "love means never having to say you are sorry" sappy kind of utterances. In sum, that kind of repentance is needed and important for the community of a faith and beyond...of course. Hence, we don't just forget about it, and hope that injury will go away. Rather, the rebuilding of relationships through acknowledging the act with the other person is basic to loving one another, as the Master has called those who follow Him to do.

And as far as James, John, Peter and Andrew are concerned, one would think that this understanding of what it means to repent will not hurt them at all. Perhaps being the crusty blue-collar kind of environment that fishermen may have been used to, it never hurts to have good relationships between them and with the public. They should be humble and gracious fishermen with each other and the world around them. They need to be nice, "heavenly" perhaps. So if people are nice to each other, exhibiting peace, gracefulness, and sweetness of spirit, then people can sense a little bit of heaven on earth. Being good to others with grace won't hurt our culture right now either.

2. Repenting is more than just being nicer fishermen:

But we need to take the story as a whole, all the way to the twenty-third verse. For this connection of repentance with the kingdom of God, doesn't end with cheerleading of Jesus from the shoreline. It will be more than Jesus encouraging them to play nicely together. For there will be a change coming. The four disciples are take on a new lifestyle. Keeping the idea of being ones who fish for fish, they are now to change what their "nets" are to be cast for. It will be people. Same idea of

fishing, but now for people instead of fish. (Or sheep for that matter). For the change will be about moving their lives in another direction, which is the primary reason of what the biblical language for repentance involves, as I am sure that you have heard from pulpits before. Indeed there is no indication in the text before that Jesus implies that they haven't been nice to each other. The call is not to say you are sorry, but to follow Him...a different direction for their lives than they had planned, or that the father named Zebedee had planned for either. Repentance, in this context at least, is about allowing one's life to be determined by the demands of the kingdom of heaven, of which Jesus is in charge. To get on God's team, a new direction is required.

And not that anybody has been obsessed with this reality, but Spring Training is just around the corner. Seventeen days if you are keeping score. For any team, pre-season preparation is crucial, for it involves re-learning the basics of what it means to be truly a part of the team, as a professional and productive part of the team. But the baseball player has to have their effort oriented to the team's way.

So again, to risk beating a dead horse, repentance is not a matter of a feeling, but a matter of change or direction, or perhaps as simply as orienting one's life each day to answer the daily question of "Who is Jesus Christ for me today?" (Which is not the same as "what would Jesus do?" although the questions are related). So the disciples respond, as we are well aware.

And yet one more thought along this life direction change. That is, they leave their nets. Where they are going they won't be useful. Nets will not work, even though they will be fishing. They left their nets. Did they ask Jesus if they could bring them along? We don't know. My guess is that they may have asked the question, with the response being from Jesus (channeling Dr. Emmett Brown here): nets? Where we are going you don't need nets. For that matter, canoes won't help either.

And that may be the biggest challenge for the four gentlemen. They have to leave those nets behind. Someone else will fix them if need be. There will be others who can man the boats to put food on the table...they were not the only fisherman to get up at dawn to work out on the lake. Things will not fall apart because of their new direction in life. God will provide for those not chosen to do the particular work that Peter and Andrew, as well as James and John have accepted.

3. Is it more than personal/individual change?

So there it is. Repentance is not about tears and regret and asking for forgiveness, at least not in this text. It is about discipleship, with all the implications that this simple story and call narrative can generate.

But I have to wonder out loud who the audience is.

Certainly the original readers would have noted the devotion and courage that these four men, and then eight others would have to accept the call and change their lives according to the direction of the Master. Certainly there is the image of leaving one's seat to go down front to commit one's life to Jesus which is called in some traditions as the altar call. Perhaps the story's theme resonates with the person who feels the tug of the Spirit and then accepts the invitation to change the direction of one's life and become a part of the kingdom of heaven on earth in this complex mixture of sinner/saints called the church. Maybe that day is for you. It comes to all disciples at one time or another and you know it. Maybe it is not at the end of singing the the last verse of *Just As I Am* for the fifth time, but you sense the call. Or maybe it is that moment when surrounded by the Cameron

Crazies, and your bleacher mates wonder why you are about do burst into tears. Or maybe it just makes sense one day. And you are not quite sure, but...

I would think that Peter, Andrew, James and John weren't quite sure what they were getting into, but...Oh, what the heck...which is an OK step as well.

At this point I am reminded of a story told this past week at a Transitional Ministry Conference at our Union Presbyterian Seminary by our General Presbyter the Rev. Jan Edminston of a baptism sacrament prepared for a young fellow of a congregation she served years ago. The young boy was eight years old, and therefore could answer the questions for himself, instead of his parents answering on his behalf, as is required in the ritual of infant baptism. Eventually, after the boy was presented to the congregation, the first question to this young boy was asked by the pastor: "Do you desire to baptized?" He said: "No." And then they had to find him.

Knowing what it really takes to follow Christ, we might tend to agree with the young fellow.

...on any number of levels. Church member. Church leader. Congregation. Which direction must it go to exhibit the kingdom of God to the world? For that will be life, letting Christ setting the direction ...maybe even ministry without a net.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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