

On Repentance

Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz

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On this Second Sunday of Advent when we focus on peace, we find ourselves hearing from John the Baptist in the Wilderness calling people to repent and name calling--"you brood of vipers," and threatening hellfire and damnation and cutting down trees that don't bear fruit worthy of repentance. You know, typical peaceful stuff.

John the Baptist is a fascinating Biblical figure though. Reza Aslan, the author of *Zealot* we discussed this week, has a theory (based on the Gospel of Luke) that John came from a priestly family and would have been expected to join the priestly line. Instead, John became this apocalyptic preacher who rejects his family obligations and duties to the Temple for an ascetic life in the wilderness. Aslan ponders, "Perhaps this was the source of John's immense popularity among the masses: he had stripped himself of his priestly privileges so as to offer the Jews a new source of salvation, one that had nothing to do with the Temple and the detestable priesthood: baptism."^[1]

Baptisms and water rituals were common throughout the ancient Near East. Often these rituals were believed to purify the body or change the state of a person or object from unclean to clean, from profane to holy. Yet John says in the Gospel of Matthew, "I baptize you with water for repentance."^[2] Repentance and purification are not the same thing. This whole baptism/repentance idea could have been a later addition when Christianity was forming or John might have really shaken things up in his day by calling on people to be baptized in the Jordan River for the purpose of repentance.

In the Bible there are two Hebrew and two Greek words we translate as "repent." I know I've shared this before, but the two Hebrew words mean to regret or to turn back. The literal meaning of one of the Hebrew words, *nacham* (naw-kham) may have been to sigh, an audible expression of regret.^[3] In Greek, the two words mean to think again or to change one's intentions. One of the Greek words *metanoëo* (met-an-o-eh'-o) comes from *meta*—again and *noëo*—to think. Repenting is thinking again about what one has said or done that caused harm.^[4] Repenting is about changing one's intentions; it's about regretting something and turning back to God or one another to make amends. In short, it's a rich theological concept.

In light of John's message, I'll share two modern stories about repentance. One story is from Germany and the other from New Hampshire, and both happened in October of this year. Let's discuss repentance in Germany first.

So there are times when we may be forced to repent by those who may have some authority in our lives, within a business, a school, an organization, or even a church. I appreciate Pope Francis and some of the changes he's making in the Roman Catholic Church to focus on social justice. In October he called to task Bishop Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst, otherwise known as the Bishop of Bling. And I can't say his name again, so I'll refer to him as the Bishop of Bling from here on out. Pope Francis removed the Bishop of Bling from his diocese after protests about the bishop's new private residence under renovation which cost about \$40 million dollars--supposedly \$475,000 was spent on a walk-in closet and \$20,000 on a bathtub.^[5] So if I ask for a pool with a water slide at the parsonage, I hope F&A will bear in mind that I could be asking for a half a million dollar walk-in closet instead. The Vatican didn't say how long the Bishop of Bling would be away from his diocese, but they sent him off to a Benedictine monastery for a "spiritual time of recovery."

Many people in the Bishop of Bling's diocese in Germany have been protesting his lavish lifestyle for years, but action was finally taken with this new Pope. In fact, Pope Francis recently preached after the whole incident, "When a person is attached to money, he destroys himself, he destroys the family. Money destroys! It does, doesn't it? It binds you. Money serves to bring about many good things, so many works for human development, but when your heart is attached in this way, it destroys you." [6] That's a bold statement from Pope Francis. And I think that John the Baptist would have resonated with his message. Or perhaps it's more accurate to say that the Pope may like these stories about John the Baptist, particularly since John himself walked away from what could have been a lavish lifestyle in order to be with the people and preach a different way of being. John the Baptist may have been just like St. Francis of Assisi whom Pope Francis chose to be named after; all the connections here are pretty profound.

John the Baptist commanded folks to repent--to regret, to turn back, to think again, and to change one's intentions. UCC Minister Kathryn Matthews Huey explains John's message like this, "Someone is coming, he says, and what you do, matters. Get rid of everything that's blocking the way of the One who is to come. Get rid of greed and selfishness, of hostility and resentment, of doubt and despair. Reshape your lives and the life of your people so that the poor and those pushed to the margins are brought back into the life of the community. Strive for peace by working for justice. What you do, matters." [7]

Get rid of greed and selfishness; don't be attached to stuff so much. Get rid of whatever blocks the path from you to God and from God to you. The funny thing about the Bishop of Bling's \$40 million dollar residence is that there's been discussion about turning his mansion into a soup kitchen and refuge for the poor. What a message that would send not just to all bishops within the Roman Catholic Church or the faithful in Germany particularly who are horrified by what's happened, but to the world. Here's this over-the-top mansion intended for a religious leader who totally lost sight of serving the lost and the least as Jesus taught. But to truly repent, it will now be a place of refuge for the poor. And they can be the ones soaking in that \$20,000 bathtub!

That's a story of forced repentance. Here's our second modern story about repentance in New Hampshire, repentance that came from the heart and was completely voluntary. Some of you may have heard about Ryan Marotta, a middle school boy who was bullied for wearing pink shoes to school in honor of Breast Cancer month and his mother who is a breast cancer survivor. Ryan came to school wearing pink shoes to support his mom, but got relentlessly bullied by some of his classmates. It was bad enough that he decided to stop wearing his pink shoes.

Many of his middle school classmates discovered why he was wearing them in the first place and why he had stopped wearing them. So the following day, those kids came to school in pink shoes and pink socks and pink hats and pink shirts realizing that what they had done was wrong, and they showed their repentance outwardly. Frankly whether he was wearing pink shoes to support his mom with breast cancer or just decided to make a bold fashion choice, bullying him was not okay and the kids seemed to realize their mistake. Ryan reflected in the interview I watched that it made him so happy that people got his message and this gesture made his mom cry tears of joy. [8]

This modern story of repentance and self-imposed, voluntary repentance at that is truly powerful. Those kids thought again about causing harm to a classmate, and they changed their intentions—this is repentance pure and simple. In John's language, they bore fruit worthy of repentance by coming to school in pink themselves. When one of the students reflected on what happened he said, "Nobody should be made fun of for doing that 'cuz he was supporting his mom and that's not very kind." [9] Hopefully they learned a lasting lesson on acceptance,

kindness, and that lovely Greek term metanoeo (met-an-o-eh'-o), thinking again about what you've said or done that caused harm.

As much as this morning's scripture with John's fiery preaching seems judgmental, it's also empowering when you really think about it. We have the chance to repent and what we do in this life matters, that's a good thing. Again, Kathryn Matthews Huey says, "Isn't that a wonderful thing--to know that we can participate in God's dream of peace for us? That we can repent, turn toward God and away from everything that keeps us from God, that keeps us from the peace and wisdom and righteousness of God? That we can radically re-orient our lives, clear a path, prepare the way of the Lord? That we can re-shape our lives and the life of this community, and we can reach out to the world beyond these walls, beyond our city, even beyond our nation, and speak, and live, words of peace?"[10]

It's awesome, it's incredible, what a gift to know that we can set things right in our lives and in our community and in our world with God's help. What an opportunity that we can radically reorient our own lives to create a clear path from God to us and us to God. And we can do it just in time for Christ breaking forth into our midst, God with us forever, on Christmas. May it be so and thanks be to God, Amen.

[1] Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*, 83.

[2] Matthew 3:11, NRSV.

[3] James Rowe Adams, "Repent and Repentance," in *From Literal to Literary: The Essential Reference Book for Biblical Metaphors*, 243.

[4] Adams, "Repent and Repentance" in *From Literal to Literary*, 244.

[5] Mark Memmott, "'Bishop of Bling Mansion May Become Refuge for the Poor,'" October 28, 2013, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2013/10/28/241391104/bishop-of-bling-mansion-may-become-refuge-for-poor>

[6] Mark Memmott, "'Bishop of Bling' Suspended by Pope Francis," October 23, 2013, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2013/10/23/240216645/bishop-of-bling-suspended-by-pope-francis>

[7] Kathryn Matthews Huey, *UCC Sermon Seeds*, Second Sunday of Advent, December 8, 2013.

[8] Jessica Moskowitz, "The Good Stuff," CNN, November 4, 2013, <http://newday.blogs.cnn.com/2013/11/04/school-goes-pink-in-honor-of-bullied-kid/>

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Kathryn Matthews Huey, *UCC Sermon Seeds*, Second Sunday of Advent, December 8, 2013.