

A Sermon about Repentance, FELC 9/11/2022 Rev. Timothy Lincoln

[1] In the New Testament, Paul is perhaps the most dramatic example of someone who turned from being an enemy of the Christian movement and its Lord Jesus to being a zealous disciple.

In today's second lesson we hear Paul speak autobiographically:

I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy. . . . Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners---of whom I am the foremost. [1 Tm. 1:13, 15]

The traditional word for the change in Paul when seen from our point of view is *repentance*; the words for this change from God's point of view are *grace* and *forgiveness*.

The first of Martin Luther's 95 theses is this: **"When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' [Mt 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."** [Luther's Works, American ed. 31:25.]

We often begin worship services with a time of confession. We should not think of this part of the service as a sort of liturgical throat clearing before worship starts.

Corporate confession is a painful moment of honesty about our continued need to repent.

[2] Let's acknowledge that this Christian story about God and God's relationship to human being is counter cultural. It is giant-sized story that begins with creation. It continues with human beings disregarding God's intentions for the world, and God's persistence in caring for us by sending Jesus, who is the sign of our restored relationship with God.

The idea that we are sinners who need help—the kind of help that only God can give us--- differs from the dominant story that we Americans like to tell ourselves. We believe in rugged individualism or autonomy or, as we say nowadays, libertarianism.

In our cultural story, we don't believe that God's help is required.

Even Disney Corporation has its own version of rugged individualism. Good old Mary Poppins is, in addition to being magical, nearly perfect in every way.

Disney heroes and heroines discover that all they need to do is "follow their heart" and rely on their own inner resources.

It is only a short care ride from Disney's mantra of "following your heart" to the pronouncements of crochety politicians who shake their heads at poor people and tell them that America is the land of opportunity, so if they are social and economic losers, well that's their own fault.

[3] The Christian story about a God who is gracious sounds like nonsense unless, like you and me and countless of our spiritual ancestors, we discover that we are sinners caught up in a web of harm despite our best efforts.

Repentance is not a one-time thing.

The Bible says that awareness of our need to repent comes to Paul in a dramatic fashion: he is going along, policing religious orthodoxy, a kind of Jewish Dog the Bounty hunter, until he has a spiritual car wreck on the road to Damascus.

One of my colleagues at Austin Seminary was very good at memorizing Bible verses. He used to memorize entire books of the Bible to compete in Bible verse memorization competitions---yes, there are such things.

When a teenager, he was memorizing the Sermon on the Mount. Suddenly it occurred to him that he should either stop memorizing the Bible or should start taking what Jesus says in it more seriously.

Repentance is not a one-time thing.

When I was young, it was obvious what I needed to repent from. I didn't arrest Christians like St. Paul, but I did make life miserable for my little brothers. And so I repented. More than once. It was helpful to have insistent parents.

When I became an adult, I didn't commit war crimes. But I discovered that my off-hand comments as a novice pastor caused harm far beyond my intention. And I repenting for that.

I have not been convicted by a lawcourt of using my official position to kill Black people---but I have been convicted in my own mind of my ongoing complicity in white America's persistent use of Black bodies as disposable resources.

And I am working to imagine adequately what repenting of America's original sin of racism might be.

Yes, the entire Christian life is one of imperfect and repeated repentance.

[4] We gather this morning on a somber day of remembrance of the September 11th attacks. These attacks like recent acts of violence in Uvalde and Buffalo perpetrated against people who were going about their daily lives, puncture our sense of security.

They remind us that cheerful stories about things always working out don't really capture the truth of our human experience: We are broken. We need grace.

Now, there is more to the Christian story than being sinners saved by the grace of Jesus Christ and the joy that our repentance brings God.

Elaborating *all that* is for other sermons.

But today's word is that we don't outgrow our need to repent.

We don't outgrow God's overflowing touches of grace.

The saying is sure: Christ Jesus came to save sinners, always including you and me.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.