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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
March 3, 2013
Luke 13:1-19
3rd Sunday in Lent

“On Repentance”

O God, we thank You for this day. We thank You for another opportunity to be faithful to You, and to take what you have blessed our lives with and to reach out in love to others. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

Repentance. It’s one of those fancy words that church people like to throw around. “Repent!” John the Baptist preached. “Repent!” Jesus says at the beginning of Mark’s gospel. And today in Luke he says it again: “repent.”

You know when someone tells you something numerous times, it’s got to be important.

So what does it mean to repent?

Kathleen Norris, an author who explores the spiritual life, once wrote about a little boy who had a pretty good understanding of what it meant to repent.

He wrote a poem called “The Monster Who Was Sorry.”

He began by admitting that he hates it when his father yells at him; his response in the poem is to throw his sister down the stairs, and then to wreck his room, and finally to wreck the whole town. The poem concludes: “I sit in my messy house and say to myself, ‘I shouldn’t have done all that.’”

Norris writes: *“My messy house” says it all: with more honesty than most adults could have mustered, the boy made a metaphor for himself that admitted the depth of his rage and also gave him a way out. If that boy had been a novice in the fourth-century monastic desert, his elders might have told him that he was well on the way toward repentance, and not such a monster after all, but only human. If the house is messy, they might have said, why not clean it up, why not make it into a place where God might wish to dwell?*

Like the little boy, we can all think of times when we shouldn’t have **done** that, or shouldn’t have **said** that, or shouldn’t have **written** that, the “that” being different for all of us. My grandmother always said never write anything you wouldn’t want read in court. It’s advice I’ve stuck to, especially in this day of e-mails and text messages when it’s too easy to hit “forward” or hit “reply all” or to hear something in an e-mail that wasn’t there. But like anyone, I’ve said things I shouldn’t have said and most of the time I have apologized and said I’m sorry and really, truly meant it. At times like this I always hope I learn from the mistake I’ve made so I won’t make the same mistake again.

This, my friends, is repentance. Like the little boy in the poem, repentance is looking around and saying to yourself, “I really shouldn’t have done that,” and then making amends for it.

In church terms, to repent is to turn away from sin and to turn towards a new way of life. Think of it simply as turning around; where you used to face one way (and perhaps held a wrong belief or bad attitude or maintained a sinful habit), you’ve turned around and no longer hold that belief or attitude or commit that sin. It’s very important to know that repentance is a two-fold action; you must first acknowledge the sin and then commit yourself to a new way of life. It’s not enough just to acknowledge it; you have to be committed to changing your ways, too.

Jesus tells us today that we must repent.

Why? Well, he’s hanging out with his fellow Galileans who tell him about a horrible crime Pilate had committed against them for no apparent reason. Apparently Pilate had sent his soldiers into the sacred precincts of the temple and had Jesus’ own countrymen cut down like lambs to be slaughtered.

Whether or not that event actually happened, we have no idea. But it’s pretty clear that the Galileans are trying to appeal to Jesus’ nationalistic sympathies because they want him to galvanize the forces. But instead Jesus takes the conversation a different direction and asks them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?”

Jesus’ question assumes the popular belief that suffering is the result of sin. The thinking goes like: If you get hit by a car and die, you must have done something wrong. If you get cancer, you must have done something wrong. If you get struck down by a bolt of lightning, you must have done something wrong.

We see this bad theology played out by all sorts of people, but Jesus doesn’t buy it for a minute. He makes it clear that God doesn’t arbitrarily punish people for their sins while sparing others. After all, even an unproductive fig tree gets another chance at life.

On the other hand, he says, the sudden calamities that claim human lives can serve as a warning of sudden judgement. The fig tree in the parable was given another year to live, but if it doesn’t produce any fruit in that year, it will be chopped down. In other words, time is short. Repent now while you still can.

Jesus’ parable strikes us where we are vulnerable. We know we can’t protect ourselves or our loved ones against misfortune, and Jesus affirms that these misfortunes are not God’s doing. But, Jesus also affirms that tragedies are graphic reminders that life is fragile, and we may stand before our maker at any time.

In order to understand this parable in contemporary context, we can use the example of 9/11. You might recall that after 9/11 there was a sudden resurgence of patriotism, and making time for family and friends, and not living a life of such selfishness. People said they would make more time for the things that really matter in life. But have any of us really changed our ways all that much? Or are we back to living the same life we did on September 10, 2001 with a little more fear and anxiety mixed in?

It has been said so many times that life is not a dress rehearsal. We aren't here to rehearse life, we're here to live it. What would your life be like if you lived each day like it was your last? I know this is easy to say but difficult to practice. Yet our parable invites us to consider the gift of one more year. The fig tree was given one more, one more chance to bear fruit. What would you do if you were given a year to make up for wrongs done and opportunities missed? How would you live your life? Because, really, each day is a gift from God, and each day should be lived in such a way that you have no fear of giving an account of your life to God.

In the parable of the fig tree, many of the first time listeners of this story would have known that there was a three-year period of preparation before one looked for fruit. This allowed time for the tree to mature. Now, for an additional three years, the owner has become frustrated, looking for fruit. He wanted something for his investment. The tree was planted to produce figs, it was not there to be beautiful or to cast shade or to provide lumber. Up to this point, it was zero in production. It was not fulfilling its purpose.

This parable invites us to ask ourselves "Am I seeking to be faithful to God's purpose for my life with the time I have left?"

Henry David Thoreau once wrote: "Do not be too moral. You may cheat yourself out of too much life. Aim above morality. Be not simply good, **be good for something.**"

Are you being faithful to God's purpose for your life?

As a Catholic monk Martin Luther decided that no livelihood, no one person's purpose, was dearer to the heart of God than another, so he left the monastery to proclaim the priesthood of all believers. It's an idea that was the hallmark of the Protestant Reformation. It says that all of us have a calling, all of us have a purpose, all of us have a vocation-not just church-types: clergy, ministers, preachers, and the like. All of us have a calling.

Your vocation may be the job you get paid for, but often times it's not. Barbara Brown Taylor says she has come to think of vocation as the "act of becoming fully human", which she says is:

- learning to turn gratitude for being alive into some concrete common good.
- It means growing gentler to human weakness.
- It means practicing forgiveness of my and everyone else's hourly failures to live up to divine standards.

- It means learning to forget myself on a regular basis in order to attend to the other selves in my vicinity.
- It means living so that 'I'm only human' does not become an excuse for anything."

The point, she writes, "is to find something that feeds your sense of purpose, and to be willing to look low for that purpose as well as high." And so, your spiritual practice this week is to begin the work of discerning what your purpose is, assuming you haven't gotten it all figured out. To do that, I suggest you turn to God in prayer, look at what you like to do, and listen to the voices of other people.

Frederick Buechner once gave this definition for vocation: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." (*Wishful Thinking*, page 119)

The fig tree was given another opportunity, another year to live. Today is another opportunity, not to dwell on what we missed, but to repent and change our ways and live into God's calling for our lives. Dwelling on past sins is not the point of repentance. Learning from those sins and changing our ways, is.

Pastor Martin Niemoeller, imprisoned at Dachau for seven years, wrote: "In Germany, the Nazis first came for the communists. I didn't speak up because I wasn't a communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for trade unionists, but I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics; I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time, there was no one left to speak for me."

For us the final day has not come. We still have time to repent and be fruitful. We can still do as Isaiah challenges, "Seek the Lord while he may be found. Call upon him while he is near." And so let us rejoice in God's grace this day. May each of us this day be faithful to God.

Amen.