

Repentance and the Forgiveness of Sins

It was my late dear friend John Kusel who explained to me that Cumbernauld, Scotland, was built as what is called a *New Town* after the second World War. As such, it has an elaborate system of paths that so that citizens could walk to parks, to each other's homes, even to the corner market, without having to step in the path of an oncoming car. John proudly informed me of this fact as he offered to lend me his bicycle to get a closer look at the towns that comprise the region as I served as exchange pastor of the Kildrum Parish.

What John neglected to mention is *that the paths aren't always continuous*. This wouldn't be important except that, without GPS, I can't find my way out of a paper bag with a road map.

On that first bike ride, I came to the end of a path, noted that I could continue on the street, and continued in the direction that seemed logical.

I was having a fine time. It was a lovely Scottish summer night, by which I mean it wasn't raining *at that very moment* so I didn't need a jacket. I rode on.

At about 7 o'clock, knowing the sun would go down in another three hours or so, I turned the bike around to head back to the manse.

Or so I thought. All the turns looked alike. The scenery had overtaken me as I had gotten out of the town proper, and I stopped paying attention every time the path changed.

To make a very long story short, I realized quickly that I was very, very lost.

Once I realized the futility of my attempts to figure out where I was, I was willing to take whatever help was offered, but my initial inquiries were stymied by my American drawl and the Scots' burr. Finally, help came in the form of some teenaged boys who were up to the sort of garden-variety adolescent skullduggery one would expect of unsupervised teenagers who managed somehow to get their hands on a great quantity of sweet, cheap wine.

Beggars can't be choosers, so I asked directions yet again.

To my surprise, they were far and away the most helpful. They walked me to the highway that I needed to get on to get back to town, which I now realized was at least an hour away. Along the way, they offered commentary on my predicament, "If you don't mind my saying [and really, was I in any position to mind?] you're a wee bit daft to get so far from where you want to be with no directions!"

I toyed briefly with making some comment about who was a wee bit daft in light of their nearly empty jug of wine, but then I remembered that old Mark Twain quote that there are some lessons that are learned only one way.

Here is the moral of the story: My attempts to find my own way had only resulted in my getting further and further lost.

I had to change course.

I thought I was significantly west of town and I was actually significantly *east!*

I was *lost*.

I needed help.

I had to *turn around*.

That is the definition of repentance: It means *to turn around*. Whether in the Old Testament or the New, it means the same thing, literally: to turn around.

That is Jesus' charge to his disciples at the end of Luke: They should *preach* repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

But I suspect many are uncomfortable with words like *repentance*. Perhaps we labor under some unhelpful impressions of the word.

Maybe we heard it first in hellfire and brimstone sermons, if we were unlucky.

Or it could be we still hear it and we think someone is saying we're bad people, or that we're somehow up to no good.

Rightly conceived, repentance is more clear-eyed than that.

Repentance sometimes just means recognizing that we're stuck in the wrong spot... like the other side of Cumbernauld.

I was lost, keeping going the way I was going wasn't going to get me *unlost*, and I had to stop and turn around.

Repentance is the recognition that something must change; the way you're going simply won't get you there.

That is how Jesus means it.

Throughout the Gospel of Luke, Jesus frequently pointed to the reality that where folks thought they were going wouldn't get them there.

At the end of Luke, he charges the disciples to go and tell folks that they can change direction, indeed God wants them to. Those who pay attention to the Old Testament already know that *repentance is what God has always offered to God's people*.

In this near-valedictory from Jesus, Luke is setting up volume two of the story, the Acts of the Apostles. Jesus, crucified and risen, has appeared to his disciples and is using their encounter with him to teach them yet again what it means to be his followers.

The narrative structure of Luke is designed here to remind the reader not once, but many times, that the Jesus who has suffered on our behalf is who comes to the disciples reminding them of their calling. He appears, not in ghostly form, but physically: scarred from his suffering and eating broiled fish to highlight his physical presence. Thus, the one sending them now to proclaim repentance and the forgiveness of sins is the one crucified and risen.

This is not cheap grace. Moreover, it is not exclusive grace either.

The disciples are sent with a message of indiscriminate grace, and in Acts we will see that they carry it everywhere they went. God's grace is offered to absolutely everyone the disciples encounter.

But their sermons aren't new material: God has been in the redemption business from the very get-go. Repentance and forgiveness of sins is the very essence of who God is: committed to creating and to restoring creation.

Fred Craddock writes,

"The commission of the disciples, like their instruction, was rooted in the Jewish Scriptures. To say that 'it is written' is the equivalent of saying 'It has been God's plan all along.' In other words, the new is not *new* but is the *old* properly interpreted. The plan of God already set forth in Scripture contains a message and offer that constitute the charter of the Christian mission. The *message* is that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead. The *offer* is the gift of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. That this message and offer should go to *all* the nations was not a later development...the mission to the world was God's plan from the beginning."¹

It is important to note that *nowhere* does Jesus allow the disciples (or anyone else, for that matter) the privilege of thinking of themselves as the arbiter of anyone else's repentance.

They have one job only: Proclamation.

Historically, the church has gotten away sometimes from this charter of proclaiming the message and the offer, and this departure has threatened the very understanding of grace that we are chartered to proclaim. In the late William Placher's book, The Domestication of Transcendence, in a chapter entitled, *The Domestication of Grace*, he recounts the story of Ann Hutchinson of the Massachusetts Bay colony. Falling under the sway of the preaching of John Cotton, Hutchinson began preaching a grace that was God's free gift. Cotton preached that "God doth sometime poure out the Spirit of Grace upon the most bloody, the most haynous, and most desperate, and most prophane, and most abominable sinners."²

Who would ever be afraid to repent before a God of such grace?

¹ Craddock, Fred. Luke in *Interpretation*. P291 *emphasis mine*

² Placher, William. The Domestication of Transcendence. P105

The local magistrates however, were understandably vexed. "This would not do," Placher continues, "Take Cotton seriously and the local drunk might be as likely to receive divine grace as the pious governor of the colony. To leaders of a colony striving to create a city on a hill to inspire all the world with its virtues, Cotton seemed to be opening up, as one of them put it, 'such a faire and easie way to Heaven, that men may passe without difficulty.' Would ethical efforts not even matter?"³

The dilemma Cotton and Hutchinson faced in the early colony brings us to one of the oldest chestnuts of modern theology, and not-so-modern theology, the idea that, so long as we keep at repentance, we may do whatever we wish with no concern for the ethical demands of the Gospel.

The early church called that a heresy, *anti-Nomianism*, and it can be paraphrased with the words of Rasputin: God loves to forgive; I love to sin. The arrangement works.

That is meant by the term *cheap grace*.

That is not the point of repentance.

That is not the point of the forgiveness of sins.

What God offers is for our lives to change course.

Luke brings us back to the *physicality* of the risen Jesus. This charge is not given by one who doesn't know what it is to love and suffer, but instead by the one faithful unto death and raised from the dead by God who has self-declared from the beginning to be the God of redemption.

This is a God who offers repentance in a comedy of redemption to sinners as lost as I was on that country road, appearing in the unlikely guise of fellow redeemed sinners just as I was pointed on the right path by a bunch of drunken teenaged Scots.

And therein lies the Gospel for us today: Repentance is offered as the good news that *whatever it is, it can change*.

Repentance means that whatever weighs on us, it can change.

I'm not saying it's easy, but I *am* saying that there is *nothing* outside of the grace of God to forgive and redeem.

Nothing.

Not in our personal life, not in our congregational life, not in our national life.

Our hearts can be turned. It doesn't have always to be the way that it is now.

If everything is going great for you right now that might not sound like much.

But if it's grace you need, *repentance* says, "There's a way home from here."

³ Ibid, p105

It is said that in John Calvin's Geneva, he insisted that worship should always begin with the assurance of pardon. Before the hymns, even before the confession of sin, because he believed so fervently that the grace of God precedes *everything*. The grace of God was present in creation, the grace of God accompanied us in the desert, the grace of God is shown most clearly on the cross, because the God who sits as judge is the God who put everything on the line for us *not because God was incomplete, but because we are*.

Jesus gives us a message of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. It is a message offered in light of the crucifixion and resurrection, and so it is by definition a costly message.

Repentance is a word for anyone who has ever gotten lost.

Repentance is a word for anyone who just can't get there from here. Repentance is the word that we don't redeem ourselves, God does. Repentance is the invitation to trust God, who is always looking for the lost, calling out, "Turn around, this is the way home."

Because, finally, regarding the forgiveness of sins: That was already done on the cross.

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