

“Rescuing Repentance from Fundamentalism”

Matthew 4.12–23

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 23 Jan 2004

When was the last time you heard anyone at Plymouth preach a sermon on repentance? Even if you’ve been at Plymouth for quite a few years, you are probably having trouble recalling even a mention of repentance.

Many of us who consider ourselves theologically progressive don’t think much about the concept of repentance – let alone engage in it – except to characterize it as something fundamentalists preach about all the time. And that’s our loss. So, this morning, I hope you’ll join me as we “rescue repentance from fundamentalism.”

The Gospel According to Matthew records that when John the Baptizer was arrested, Jesus took his place and “began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.’” It’s important to note that while Mark and Luke typically use the term “Kingdom of God,” Matthew refers to the reign of rule of God as “the Kingdom of Heaven.” It’s the same concept: that God’s new order for the world is at hand. And in this passage, Jesus says that we’d better get our act together.



When I say, “repentance,” do you have a gut reaction? Is it a positive or a negative reaction? Why is that? Is it because of the association I already mentioned with Christians who may not share some of our perspectives on the faith? Or do we really feel that we have nothing we need to repent for? Are we sinless? Do you feel guilty because you really haven’t repented? Or are you confused about what repentance really means? Let’s take a closer look.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines repentance as “to feel sincere regret or remorse.” So according to the OED, it’s a feeling, and if we carry it out to its logical conclusion, then when we repent, we feel sorry about something. I think for our purposes, that’s true, but it only goes about 40 percent of the way toward a real definition of repentance. What if we stop at feeling regret or remorse and leave it at that?

The *American Heritage Dictionary* does a bit better, saying that to repent is “to make a change for the better as a result of remorse or contrition for sins.” So, the assumption is that it’s not just a feeling, but also a follow-up action. I think that definition is about 80 percent there, but still falls short.

The Greek word that we translate as repentance is *metanoia*, and the verb form is *metanoeo*, which is defined in classical literature as changing one’s mind or one’s purpose. Any definition is limited, but if we take elements from all of them, we get a closer approximation of what Jesus was talking about. It isn’t just a feeling; it isn’t merely an action; it isn’t just changing one’s mind. ***It’s a process of transformation.***



I see *metanoia* as a six-step process. The first stage is ***separation*** resulting from a mistake, violation, or sin. That may sound strange to you that separation is the first step, yet if we are whole, if all our relationships are whole, then we have no gap to bridge: we’re already there.

Separation can be from self, as when we are untrue about our deepest calling and our personhood. Separation from others is the usual result of an injury or offense

that we, unconsciously or deliberately, perpetrate against others. (And we all do this.) And a third type of separation is between oneself and God. This separation is one of the key definitions of sin: causing separation between ourselves and God.

So, as an example, let's think of a brother and a sister. They grow up together, but they become estranged when the brother lashes out deeply and hurtfully at the sister. He has caused separation.

The second stage of *metanoia* is **recognition** of the distance caused by the offense, mistake, or violation. We need to observe that a separation has taken place and not deny that it ever happened. So, our sister and brother might see that the initial hurt has caused distance between them; they know there is a problem.

The third stage involves the **admission of fault** for the separation or mistake or violation to ourselves that we were wrong in what we did, and that we need to do something about it. This may take years, but it represents a real turning point in the process. In the song, "Margaritaville," Jimmy Buffet starts by saying "Some people claim that there's a woman to blame," then "it's nobody's fault," then "it could be my fault," and finally "it's my own 'darned' fault." There is a dose of humility in that progression! So, the brother may start off by admitting to himself that he was wrong in hurting his sister, but if your family is like the one I grew up in, it isn't a quick and easy process.

A fourth component in *metanoia* is actively **seeking forgiveness**. We need to ask the person we've injured for to forgive us for the way we have hurt them. This is fairly easy for some of us and brutally difficult for others. Asking for forgiveness requires real humility: sometimes, even if we've admitted our wrongdoing to ourselves, we get paralyzed by fear and shame and stall before asking to be forgiven. (After all, we might not receive forgiveness.) Yet, we don't necessarily need to be forgiven in order to move on with our own process, but it often helps.

Not only do we need to seek the forgiveness of the injured party, but also we need to ask for God's forgiveness as well. Think of it this way, if you're a parent and someone injured your child, wouldn't you expect an apology? When we injure one of God's children, we need to apologize to the parent. And God's ear is always ready to engage in a conversation. And finally we need to forgive ourselves for our transgressions, and that can be the hardest part for many of us.

Just to review where we are: we've seen separation, recognition, admission of fault, and seeking forgiveness. But step five is where the real *metanoia* comes in: we need to **transform** the way we think, feel, and act. We need to change our mindset, we need to change course, and we need to change our purpose. And that kind of deep transformation is not only at the heart of *metanoia*, it is very difficult to accomplish. Repent has two Latin roots: *ponere* to place or put and *re* again. So, it's as if we get the chance do it over again, to transform ourselves and get it right this time. In 12-step programs, they call this making amends.

We need to train ourselves to do things differently and to change not just our outward behaviors, but to have a deep-seated change of heart that reinforces our new behaviors and really completes the transformation. If the Christian journey is not about the process of transformation – both individually and socially – that pilgrimage is not reaching its potential. We need to be changed for good by *metanoia*.

A final step – **reconciliation** – isn't always possible in human relationships, even if forgiveness and transformation have happened. It might be that even if the

sister forgives the brother for a deep injury, she may not want to set herself up to be hurt again, even if he perceives his own transformation.

We can all take comfort, though, in the knowledge that God is always open to reconciliation. In fact, if you grew up in the Roman Catholic tradition, you know that the act of confession is part of reconciliation or coming back into right relationship with God. It's the final step is bridging the gap caused by the initial offense. In our tradition, we don't require the intercession of a priest for confession, rather we affirm the priesthood of all believers, which puts a lot of responsibility on each of us. And believe it or not, in the UCC Book of Worship, we have a service of reconciliation for a person who is seeking God's forgiveness. And I'm happy to help with that, if you ever find it useful. "Nothing," said the apostle Paul, "can separate us from the love of God."

Separation, recognition, admission of fault, seeking forgiveness, transformation, and reconciliation form a process by which we – and those around us – can be changed. And is it ultimately about the destination of becoming forgiven or is it more important to focus on the journey of transformation that takes us there? What would it be like if we could do that in our own lives? How would we feel about ourselves, about others, and about God?

And what if we could engage in repentance not only on an individual level, but on a social level as well? What would it be like for a nation to admit to itself that it caused a war? That it apologized to another nation for the war? That it had a change of heart that was reflected in its international relations? And that ultimately resulted in the restoration of relationship between the two states? Before you think that would never happen, I'd like to remind you of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, which focused not on retribution, but on shining the light of day on what actually happened, restoring relationship, and then building a new future for the nation. As Desmond Tutu says in describing his *Ubuntu* theology: "I am because you are."



So, if we expect a great catch; if we anticipate that we are going to be followers of Jesus, we have to really engage the act of repentance, of *metanoia*. If we aren't willing to be transformed by the process of our faith and living – if we aren't willing to cast our nets aside – then we aren't going to be able to follow Jesus fully.

So, before we consign the word "repentance" to the scrap heap of theologically incorrect phrases, let us look deeply into ourselves. Let us look around us, and see the people who we need to engage in our process of transformation. And let us have the courage to begin anew.

Amen.