

December 4, 2016

Repent – An Invitation to Turn Around

PRAYER

May the words of my mouth be mediations of our hearts and be always acceptable unto Thee. O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. AMEN

SERMON

Yesterday I had the opportunity to travel to Mobile to our cathedral to participate in the ordination of three transitional deacons. Two will be graduating from seminary in about six months. The other is doing studies and will also be eligible in six months to be ordained priest. And of course, our bishop Russell Kendrick was the one who was ordaining these three. But he was also the preacher, that's not always the case. But he was the preacher for this ordination. And he began, not by focusing on the readings for yesterday, but by reminding us gathered that there were quite a few in the cathedral. That was nice to see, that there were quite a few clergy who attended from different parts of the diocese. That also was very good to see. They talked about the lesson for today. The gospel for today. And the call to repentance. And he said something that I had not thought about. And on the two-hour drive home I couldn't really get it out of my mind. And one of the good things about not writing out a sermon is that it's not so much trouble if you start over. And that's what I did yesterday as I was traveling back from the ordination, I started again because of what he said about repentance.

He said that repentance really has been a word that has been hijacked, if you will. It has been associated with a repent for the end is near. An idea that it is turning your life into something else. That the real meaning and the simple meaning of repentance has gotten lost. Repentance and I'm sure you know this you've been coming to the episcopal church for some time. The word repent means to turn around. That's all it means, turn around. In the sense that John used it that the church ought to be using it. It's just that, to turn around. To recognize that one is traveling in a wrong direction. And the call is to turn around, to turn back. Come back home, come back to God is what it means.

And he said it really should be said not as a threat. Repent, sinner for the Lord is coming. The end is near. You will burn in hell if you don't repent and turn away from your sins and be the person that God wants you to be. Have you heard that sermon before? Yeah. I could have been a Baptist preacher. But let's think of it in a different way. Let's think about a call to repentance not as a threat, but as an invitation. Isn't that really what it should be, intended to be anyway? An invitation to turn around because what's behind us. If we are sinners and we all are. It is a matter of going the wrong direction, not going towards God. And so, an invitation to turn around, to turn back, is an invitation to turn back to God. And what does that mean?

As I was thinking about that, the scripture that kept coming up in my head is the prodigal son. It is the perfect illustration. Here we have a young man who wants to do things his own way. Now which one of us as young people didn't want to do it our own way? We wanted to, we thought we had a pretty good idea about how life should be lived and we had a pretty good idea how we wanted to live it. And so, did the prodigal son. And he decided the way he didn't want to live it was to be there with his father. Taking care of the farm. Taking care of the animals. Taking care of the crops. Being there with his older brother. He was low man on the totem pole after all. And so, he goes and he says to his father, "How

about if you just go ahead and give me my inheritance now and I'll go on my way, I'll live my life the way I want to. And I'm sure I can do a better job than staying here on the family plot and taking care of the animals and the crops." Now the implication there is that I'm leaving and I'm leaving all this behind and you behind father as if you were dead. Because that's the way you get an inheritance. And rather than the father being offended by that, he says "Okay, you want to go and do it on your own. Here you go. Good luck!" And it starts off pretty good for the son. He goes, he has money in his pocket. He's having a good time. He's eating, he's drinking, he's traveling around until the money runs out. He hasn't done anything to replenish and to build a life for himself. And so his way has not been a very profitable way. A matter of fact now he is bankrupt. Both physically bankrupt, he has no money. Morally bankrupt, he has no friends. He has no family. And he has dropped as low as the good Jewish boy could go. He's been hired on by a pig farmer. And his job is to feed the pigs. Those animals that were considered unclean by the Jews.

Now imagine if somewhere along the way before he reached the very bottom, someone had invited him to come back home. Not just the father or even the older brother but someone who knew him, a friend let's say. Who came searching for the friend that they had lost, and invited him to come back. Let's look back and see what you left behind. Let's look back and see if that wasn't a better life. And a better understanding of life and then what you have created for yourself apart from all that. Maybe he could have heard that from a friend, found his way back. That doesn't happen in the parable. In the parable, he hits rock bottom. Until we hear Jesus say about him he came to himself. Finally, after being bankrupt physically, morally he comes to himself. And he sees what he really had at home. Had a father who loved him. Had a way of living life that was hard, yes. His father probably disciplined him from time to time. But yet, his father also gave him an abundance of what was necessary for him to live his life now and moving forward in the future.

And when he finally comes to himself, he does exactly what we're talking about. He turns around. He goes back. Not with the expectation that he will be the same son that he was before. That he will come back and offer himself as a servant. As the story goes, as he is still far off. Father sees him. And he doesn't sit there and wait for him to come groveling back. His first words aren't, "Well I told you so. You thought you knew better but now you know." He goes and he embraces his son. He has what he wanted all along. That never ended with the son leaving, with the child leaving. Get him a robe, get him shoes, get him a ring for his hand.

He was lost and now he's found. He found himself. It took a long journey but he found himself and he found the way to come back, to turn around, to come home. And found out that his father only wanted for him more than he ever wanted for himself when he was young. Before he knew, before he understood. I can identify with that so much. I had great parents, trust me I had great parents. They loved me, they cared for me. My father demanded you will go to college you will have a better life than me. He didn't say it quite that way but he did let me know that he wanted me to have a life that I enjoyed. To have a life that didn't require me to work like he had worked all his life for his family. And it wasn't until I was older that I could really understand and appreciate what my parents had done for me. And all the times that they had given me what I wanted or not given me what I wanted. When they disciplined me when I did things that would eventually hurt me. And it was all because of their love and their desire for me to have better than they had. To live life in a way that they had not been able to. And somewhere along the line I was finally able to translate that into that's exactly what God wants and sees in each of us.

I want more for you than you want for yourself. You think you know. You think you have an idea and an understanding of how you want to live your life and you can do it on your own. Trust me, you can't. If you go on your own you will end up like the prodigal son finding yourself bankrupt in one way or another. And all it requires is repentance, turning around. Seeing and acknowledging what God has always given us. God's love, God's forgiveness, God's peace which we cannot build for ourselves. That is what God is all about in giving his son Jesus for us. So, that we can see what it is to turn around. And to see the father who is watching for us and comes to us and embraces us. And celebrates us being a part of what he has created.

This community of the kingdom of God and perfect as it is here it's still the community that is created by God so that we can support and encourage one another. And find the way that God needs us. So, that we can live a life of joy, and we can live a life of peace, and we can live a life of hope. And we remind each other that that is a life that we are coming to as we turn around, as we repent. As we turn away from having it our own way and seeing the way God wants it for us. Because God wants for us better than we want for ourselves. And it is for us to call upon one another. And others who have not found their way into God's kingdom, to call them to repentance. Not as a threat but as an invitation. Turn to God and see what good things God has for you. Turn around, turn away, turn back to God. And see the parent that is waiting to embrace you and hold you and lift you and lead you through life. Sometimes with discipline because it's necessary. Sometimes it's with abundant blessings so that you can then shower those on others. That is the call we should hear as we go through advent. A call to repentance, an invitation to come home. That is the invitation that God holds out for us. And it is an invitation that we are called to offer to others.