

I am sure many of you have encountered street preachers, those individuals who have taken it upon themselves to proclaim to those walking by them their particular perspective on the Christian faith. Generally, their perspective involves a strong emphasis on repentance. Your time is limited. You need to get your act together. “Turn or burn,” the message often is.

I remember taking a group of older folks to somewhere in Pennsylvania to see an amazing production of the Noah’s Ark story. This play almost felt like a Broadway production with its costuming, scenery, and props. Well, whoever wrote this particular play turned the Noah story into a “turn or burn” morality play. The people of Noah’s town were told to repent of their naughtiness, their excessive drinking and sexual licentiousness. They were reminded of what time it was. But nobody seemed to care what time it was, until the waters started to rise and the doors of the ark were closed. And at that time, all kinds of people tried to get in, unsuccessfully, of course. They hadn’t heard the call to turn, so they burned, or in this case, they drowned.

It’s scenes like these that give repentance a bad name, that cause preachers like me to avoid the subject, to downplay the call to turn from sin. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his discussion of cheap grace said too often the church is involved in “the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance.” Perhaps he is right. But, it seems to me, repentance too often has been pedaled as “turn or burn,” connecting it with how awful you are and the judgment that needs to follow your awfulness. But that kind of analysis seldom brings about hopeful and helpful results. Nonetheless, I think it is

time to make repentance great again. It is time to discover the joy and the beauty of repentance. It is time to see repentance as a matter of good news.

Ezekiel in today's first reading is very interested in repentance. He is a prophet who is called to be a sentinel (a watchperson) for the people of Judah. He is to warn them. He is like the weather forecaster who is telling you that the hurricane or the tornado is on its way, so you better get ready. And God tells him that his responsibility simply is to warn his people. If they choose not to respond, well, that's their business, not his. But he must warn. And the warning that is his call is a matter of repentance. It's the very thing that the climate scientists are involved in these days. They are warning us, perhaps too late, that mother earth is taking a beating from our misuse of her. She's judging us for our poor stewardship. The climate is warming in part as a consequence of human action. The scientists are asking us to repent.

Ezekiel is asking Judah to repent at the request of God. God says to Ezekiel: Say to the house of Israel, [to Judah], "Thus you have said, 'Our transgressions and our sins, [what we have done willfully and what we have done sometimes without really knowing why], weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them.'" You see, the people are saying that their sin hasn't gotten them what they want. Their sin is killing them. It's hurting them. It's messing up their internal life and their relationships.

Richard Rohr says that sin is that which doesn't work. While I would want to go into much more detail, I like the concept. Sin doesn't give us what we want. It creates messes. And we find ourselves asking the question that the people in Ezekiel ask: How

can we live? We've gotten ourselves into quite a pickle. How do we get out of this? And God responds: "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked." I don't want to see you in this mess. I don't rejoice in things going badly for you. I rather hate it. So, turn back, O man, forswear thy foolish ways!"

Turn around. Go in a different direction. Life can be different for you. You don't have to be stuck in that addiction, lost in that resentment, trapped by that anger. You don't have to keep hurting people, keep putting yourself down. You don't have to continue to live in ways that see others as a threat. You don't have to bask in pettiness. You as a nation can be different. You as a people can leave behind the politics of stinginess and grievance. You can abandon your preoccupation with wealth and the stuff that it buys that, frankly, too often cripples you. You don't have to keep ruining the environment and neglecting the vulnerable.

All of that, frankly, doesn't look good on you. It doesn't help you. Honestly, sin makes a mess. It doesn't work. Repentance may be hard, but it's good news. It's time to make repentance great again. You know what time it is, "how it is already the moment for you to wake from sleep. Salvation is nearer to us now than ever. The night is far gone; the day is near. [It's time] to throw off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light." In some ways, repentance is a matter of joyous urgency.

For me, Jesus makes that urgency amazingly clear when, after speaking of how to manage conflict in the church, he says, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." With such words, he is reflecting the wisdom of his tradition. It was often said in his day among faithful Jews that when two or three

people gathered to read and study the Torah, God would be present. It was thought that God's glory had taken up residence when the faithful gathered. Jesus is now saying that he, as the community comes together, is the glory that is present.

The coming together of the community, therefore, is of great significance. It is a matter of urgency. As we come together, Jesus is present, in the word, in the supper, in the rubbing of elbows with one another. There is a sacred character to our being together. It is not an issue of petty morality, something you should do because good and proper people show up at church. No, what happens here is so much bigger than that. As Luther pointed out, what happens as we gather has to do with communion, not obligation. We gather because life lived best involves communion with one another and with the one who is there among us. We *need* communion, sacred connection, especially these days when so many people want to tear us apart, when so many of us want to stay home lost in our little private lives, selves, and screens.

Human and Christian community are vital for our well-being, which is why repentance is a matter of joyous urgency. Community depends upon our taking care for it. And part of the way we take care entails repentance. Community is nurtured as we are vulnerable enough to say that sometimes we are not at our best, sometimes we blow it, say stupid things and do stupid things. International community is nurtured when we as a nation admit that we haven't been at our best. We, too, have done some awful things, sometimes in the name of good. Community is cared for as we tell the truth, as we are honest about our brokenness, our willful sins and the ones we don't really know why we did or do them.

And by the way, the urgent call to care for the community not only requires you and me to admit when we have blown it; it also asks us to pursue those who have sinned against us. Note what Jesus says today; “If your brother or sister sins against you, then....” Caring for community is not simply about the vulnerability of admitting your mistakes; it is also about the vulnerability of not giving up on those who have hurt you. Those who have sinned against you need your honesty, your commitment, your desire to not allow sin to have the final word.

In many ways, to not allow sin to have the final word is what repentance is all about. Repentance makes possible new futures. It is good news. It’s not about “turn or burn.” God doesn’t desire the death of the wicked. God doesn’t thrive on you living in a mess. God, the ever-gracious, eternally merciful one forgives you and then invites you to turn around, to make repentance great again. And it *is* great, for it is part of the path that leads us to a healthier, more joyous future.