

REPENT OR RECOVER

If the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, then this must be a time of rejoicing. Right? Lent cannot be a time of sadness – not unless we really don't want the Kingdom of Heaven to come close and be real, or unless we really want to hang on to our own kingdoms and think we can do life better apart from God – and apart from God's Messiah. It is Lent, and we are “dancing in the streets,” as they say – at least dancing on the inside, in heart and soul, because the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand ... because the Kingdom of Heaven has come close in the presence of Jesus Christ our Lord in our own lives – and we are invited to come into it, and be part of it.

This is all very true, except for our unworthiness. Whatever our fancy theories about self-confidence, maturity, and becoming adults, the truth is: whenever humans get anywhere close to the Kingdom – anywhere close to real awareness of the presence of God – all pretense of maturity, confidence, or “having it all together” is instantly melted away. Oh yes, God rebuilds the confidence – on entirely new levels – but that's later. Watch Moses at the burning bush; Elijah at the cave; Peter at the great catch of fish; Paul on the Damascus Road. In every case, there is – how would we describe it? – a cringing. “*Depart from me for I am a sinful man, O Lord.*” That was Peter's response. (Luke 5:8) “*I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips,*” said Isaiah ... I couldn't possibly speak for YOU. (Isaiah 6:5)

These are not exactly the spiritual pantywaists of the human race, either. These are among the boldest we have ever produced. But not with God! So despite the great news – despite being told that the Kingdom of Heaven is now at hand, in our midst, available to us – our joy and excitement are cut by a sudden fresh realization that we are not ready for any such thing. The house is much too messy, and so is the inner dwelling place. We better get the roads ready. We have a few bad habits left over from our last personal reform. And oh dear, if the Kingdom is that close, there's simply so much to do – I'll never be ready on time. That sounds a lot more like the familiar Lent.

Before this Lent is over, we will be talking about switching to the rejoicing, at least the dancing on the inside. We will be talking about the “gifts of the Spirit” that make the Christian Life so incredibly wonderful

and beautiful, regardless of whatever is going on in the world around us. After getting to know Jesus for a while, we simply cannot hang on to the sadness and unworthiness. Not that we lose it, but His glory simply outshines our unworthiness. It is the dance of the Christian Life: Jesus keeps saying, “Come on in – into my Kingdom.” And we stand at the doorway, trying to scrape all the mud off our feet. “Wait just a minute,” we say. And He says, “Hey, come in, you really *are* welcome!” “Well,” we mutter, “just a couple minutes more, and I won’t track so much dirt into your lovely home.”

And that goes on, over and over, on many different levels – until finally we start to pay more attention to *His* love and glory than we do to our own mistakes and flaws. And finally we figure out that with His light and power, He really is not afraid of our dirt and mud. So finally we swallow hard and step in, dirt and all. Even then, we don’t like messing up His beautiful halls. So we keep repenting – changing – letting Him clean us up. But the big choice is over. We would rather have life *with* Him than without Him. And even if the mud is a lot more obvious now than it was outside His Kingdom, that’s just too bad. That’s the trouble with light – beautiful as it is, it does show the flaws.

But we aren’t going to rush to all these conclusions quite yet. We need to lay a little groundwork before going there, or it will just end up being a pretend joy – like when a good salesclerk puts on a smile before going into public. And the real story bears this out. The real world did not instantly rejoice when Jesus came bearing this wonderful news that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.

So we may end up dancing on the inside, but we won’t dance in the streets because we still know what kind of battle – what kind of conflict and strife – Jesus’ presence always causes in the real world, and often in our own lives. Whenever Jesus gets near, we repent. That does not imply that repentance is horrible. Actually, when Jesus gets near, most of us *want* to repent. In fact, if people do *not* want to repent, the probability is that they have not yet noticed that Jesus is near. It is hard to see Him, feel His presence, or sense His love or His truth and light without wanting to change – without wanting to move into a higher level of our own living. The one thing every one of us can do, if we want to, is devote the life we have more exclusively to Jesus and His WAY.

That always costs some changes, some prioritizing. Even if it only means that we decide to be more involved with His people – come to the meetings, care more about each other – even that will cost us. Even that would make a huge difference over time, if we really meant it and stuck to it. That would be a huge repentance for some of you. And of course, it can get bigger and more demanding than that. But I don't have to tell *you* this. The reason you keep at a safe distance is because you *know* it might get bigger and more demanding than you would be comfortable with. Having to choose between His LIGHT and our darkness is always tougher than we make it sound.

Anyway, Lent is a time of penitence. I know this, because I read it in a book. People who repent go into a different way of life. And everybody knows that Christianity begins with repentance. “*Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.*” And even after we choose this New WAY, in all sincerity and with earnest intentions, we do not perfectly keep this New WAY of living. So from time to time we take inventory, get penitent, and try to correct our direction and our methods – and even our habits and behavior that we so want to have match what we believe and say.

This is all theory, of course. Lots of people spend years in the church of our time and *never* repent – never turn in a new direction; never change their own wills or their own priorities; never spend sleepless nights or prayerful days eagerly longing to draw their lives in line with the will and influence of the Holy Spirit of Jesus. It takes a lot of self-awareness – plus a strong desire to change what is controlling our lives in the here and now – or we would not be able to do this. It takes drama, and usually crisis, before we truly realign our lives to the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit – before we become truly penitent.

As some of you probably guessed from the sermon title, I am leading up to a question: “Are we a recovering community?” A repentant community? A penitent community? I mean here in this place, in this congregation we call our faith family, are we a recovering community? And recovering from what? Isn't that the classic response? “Are you saved?” *Saved from what?* Do any of us have anything we want to recover from? Or are we as right about everything, and as perfect, as we try to pretend?

If you participate in an AA group, you know you are in a recovering community. You can see the evidence all around you. There are newcomers, to be sure, who aren't sure they buy it yet. But you remember

what Jake looked like, how he acted and talked, and even how he smelled only six or seven weeks ago when he first showed up. And you would have to be intentionally blind, deaf, and dumb not to notice the difference. It is a recovering community, and there is no doubt about it. People's lives are being saved, and after that, the change continues. In an AA recovering community, people are recovering from a time (and a life) when we drank or drugged, or both. Most of us tried and tried to brake the pattern – to put on the brakes without really changing. But nothing worked. Life was horrid and getting worse, though often we spoke as if we were the only ones having fun and all the other people around us were just a bunch of hypocrites.

But in a recovering community, people no longer pretend. It is one of the delights we were not expecting. There is no longer any time for such games. We have seen the handwriting on the wall, near or far, and if *this* program doesn't work, we are dead. And, far worse than that, so is everything we ever cared about, dreamed of, hoped for, or thought we might one day accomplish.

Are we in a recovering community here, in this church? Are those who come here recovering from a time when they did not put Jesus first in their lives? (If you want to get technical: those who did not put *the God who reveals himself in Christ Jesus* first in their lives.) The biblical word for this is "sin." It doesn't matter one whit whether your deeds are good or bad according to the standards of this world. "Sin" means alienation – separation – from God. Good deeds can separate you from God just as fast as bad deeds – even faster, if you believe our traditions. Pride is the king of the Seven Deadly Sins. Bad deeds often lead to repentance faster than the good deeds we are so proud of.

But back to the real question: Have you lived any part of your life when Jesus was not your top priority, not your first concern, not the most important thing in your life? Christianity, after all, is about the relationship between you and Jesus. All the rest is paraphernalia – enhancing or detracting, as the case may be.

I do happen to know lots of people who think they are doing pretty well. They live nice lives, the ocean is beautiful, friends are good, hobbies are exciting. Life is good! Yes, I know. That's what all the drunks say too – right up to the last minute ... when we either die or go into recovery. Denial works that way. I like my life just the way it is, thank you very much. You probably won't believe this, but drunks

even brag about how much they can drink, and they love to tell stories about the last bender they were on. I'm not sure I could believe that, if I hadn't done it myself. But do you know what that sounds like to the ears of somebody who is sober – somebody in recovery? Kind of like what some of you sound like when you tell me how your lives are so wonderful and busy that you have no time for God, or his church, or prayer, or the Bible.

One of the marks of denial is subterfuge – rationalization. Until we are part of a recovering community, we have layer after layer of secrets, pretense, excuses, rationalizations. We hide every manner of need, fear, anger, and passion behind a façade of well-practiced speech, behavior, and mannerisms. Have you ever been to a cocktail party? You can go all night and never hear one honest, revealing, meaningful comment. I grant you, for some people it's a game, and for others an art. And I understand more than I used to why some people enjoy it. If I like to play chess, why can't they like to play "cocktail party"? I am glad it's a free country.

In any case, being honest and open is one of the marks of a recovering community. People *expect* each other to have flaws, quirks, wounds, and scars from former times – even present times – and deep struggles still going on. They put up with a lot from each other – cut each other a lot of slack. Oh, not perfectly. One of them almost put another one through our stained-glass window last week. But how often has that happened in the last fifteen years? And they were mortified; they can't *wait* to fix it. That's a room full of men who say every week, "When I was wrong, I promptly admitted it." So they will turn the error into a deeper learning.

If you do not *expect* flaws, quirks, wounds, scars, and deep struggles in the people sitting around you here, where do you think they came from? You think they were all born with silver spoons in their mouths? Actually, some of them were, but do you really think money saves us? That if you have money, you don't need God? That money makes life easy? What kind of idolatry is that?! If we believed this, we might just believe that it might actually help people to give them money – without also introducing them to Jesus. "You don't need to make any changes in your life, just have some money. Money will fix you." Do you know how many people in AA believe that giving money to a drunk will get him sober?

So if a drunk comes into the AA program, there is almost endless patience. Sometimes, after the picture gets clear, other kinds of help are given – along with the disciplines of the program. It is personal and quiet – one individual, or sometimes two or three pooling resources – but mostly they are just trying to give the program a little time to work. On the other hand, recovering people don't show a lot of patience for those who are still drinking but won't get on the program. Underneath they may have huge sympathy, because they remember how it was. But they don't show it much, because they know sympathy alone won't do any good. They don't even have much sympathy for people who pretend to be on the program but who go right on drinking. They know – really *know* – that ENABLING will *not* help.

Our top mission as a faith community is to help others who want New Life find it. And the only New Life we know around here is LIFE in Christ Jesus. Other groups claim to know other kinds of new life. That's fine. People who go to other places to find new life are no problem to us. We don't need to be in competition. If you want to take your problems to the Lakers, the Buddhists, the synagogue, or the Rotary Club, that's fine. Maybe that's where you will get the most help. Maybe you can hear the truth you need, and find the community you can respond to, better there than here. Not a problem. The need is bigger than all of us. Our job in this faith family is to represent and offer the LIFE *we know* – the Life we ourselves live – and the Lord we ourselves love and serve. Sorry for all the qualifications, but you know how it is in our time.

Back to the point: Our top mission as a faith community is to help others who want New Life find it. (Not others who *need* new life – others who *want* New Life.) And just as in any true life of recovery, people must come into the community in order to find the New Life. Even the most brain-damaged drunk ends up knowing that. You have to come to the meetings, participate, and work the steps if you want to stay on the program. It's not a rule of the organization; *life* makes this rule! Whether we like it or understand it or not, God made things to work in this way. Don't argue with me – just show me all the drunks who have recovered outside of a recovering community.

Why has the church forgotten its own truth? If we love Jesus, we *are* “the church” – we come to the meetings, we participate in the faith family, we walk the Path together. Actually, the church has not

forgotten; it has just ceased to be “the church.” Going to church has become a silly travesty of its former meaning and purpose. People even talk about “going to church” on Easter, or at Christmas. You can “go” to a new WAY of Life, for one hour, once or twice a year? No wonder we aren’t dancing in the streets, inside *or* outside.

The upside is: After “going to church” a few times each year, most of these people seem to know far more about the church, its flaws, and its true purposes than I do. How nice for them. But that’s okay; I don’t expect much from them either. What *does* bother me is that it’s not the outsiders who have made this so confusing and unclear. It’s the people on the inside of the church who have made this so unclear in our time. They want to make sure nobody thinks they are fanatics. They want to make sure no friends or relatives think they “*have* to go to church.” And if people visit us here and nobody is working the repentance thing – living the LIFE, doing the penance – or inviting them to come try it too, then how is anyone from the outside ever going to figure it out? They come, but nothing is happening. Or it’s only an entertainment gig. Or it’s just the preacher talking about what it might be like if anybody ever actually decided to try getting sober.

Can you imagine that in an AA setting? All the drunks come to a meeting, but they bring their bottles with them and sit around drinking and talking, and from time to time they all listen to a paid speaker telling pretty stories about what it might be like if anybody ever sobered up.

So then we get people – not dumb people, since they only reflect what they have seen and experienced – who say dumb things like, “I don’t believe in organized religion.” Excuse me? You don’t believe in saving lives? You don’t believe in redemption or transformation? You think you can save lives all by yourself? Or that you can provide all the love anybody needs all by yourself, or make it grow and thrive in a vacuum? Good luck to you. You can *go* to a movie, you can *go* to bed, but you cannot *go* to church. Church is the *ecclesia* – the people of God. You either *are* the church, or you have no notion what church is or what it is about.

Of course, I won’t be able to convince folk who think and believe that way. I don’t really try to anymore. But what about you? You know better! You have actually tasted some of what the church could and should be like. It has even made a considerable difference in many of your lives. Yet even here, we still work at half-mast, because many of

you have not shaken loose from all the excuses, fears, hurts, angers, and disappointments that still cling to you from your past life – the life before you gave your life to Christ.

We *are* moving forward, making good progress. But it would help if we would either cut the anchor chains or haul them up. So we still have need for Lent, and good reason to repent. Only, please don't do it like the play-acting wing of the church usually does it. Don't do it in sadness. Don't make any sacrifices. That only leads to playing victim and feeling sorry for yourself. The New Life in Christ Jesus has never been about such things, and "we cannot get there from here" – not that way.

So please do not give up anything this Lent that is good, right, or important to you – not unless it is getting in the way of something that truly seems better, more important, more true to you. Do not give up anything that you imagine will make you more acceptable in the eyes of this world. Only give up something if Christ is calling you beyond it, or to things even more exciting and joyful. And if you really are in a battle with some demon of magnitude and power – as many of us are – then do not expect to oust it from your life with simple tricks of will-power, or by merely scolding yourself for having the demon in the first place. The demons only leave when Christ is invited in on deep levels of commitment, love, and adoration. But that brings us joy and light and gratitude, not sadness, self-pity, or complaint.

So let us try to stay off the minor and meaningless disciplines this Lent. True repentance invites Jesus to make the changes *He* wants to make in our lives. They will be few, and right at the heart of whatever is holding us back. But we have to spend extra time in prayer for Him to reveal them to us. After all, if they were obvious, we would have already taken care of them. So it will be scary, but in wondrous and exciting ways. Let us go for true repentance – which leads to light and LIFE.