

Sermon for Sunday, January 21, 2018

Got Change?

Mark 1:14-20

You and I have been here before, treading the strange territory of Mark's Gospel. And you and I have heard Jesus' call in and through the Gospel writer's words which ring through the millennia: "Repent and believe in the good news!" We have tried to live by these words and some days were better than others. So, when I looked at the lectionary for today, I checked my sermon folder on my computer to see how I've approached this text in the past. The last time I preached on this text, I focused on "good news." This time, it is the word "repentance" that got its hooks into me. What does "repentance" mean, I wonder? Is it just a theological doctrine dreamed up by anxious Protestants and Calvinists that signifies little or nothing to us anymore? A word which has plagued Western Christianity for too long?

What I learned in seminary, and what we probably have heard many times over from pulpits near and far, is this: repentance is to be sorry for what we have done, or left undone as we just confessed together this morning. It's like making a U-turn ... turning away from evil and toward God. Sort of like a New Jersey "jug handle" where you have to turn right if you want to turn left. While I don't disagree with looking at repentance this way, I don't think it is radical enough. And by saying "radical" I am not making a political statement. In the true sense of the word, "to be radical" means to take us back to the "root."

What took me back to the root of "repentance" was a new translation of the New Testament by David Bentley Hart from which I read this morning. As I mentioned, he is an Eastern Orthodox scholar who currently teaches at *Notre Dame's Institute for Advanced Study*. Granted, he's a little abrasive in his approach but nonetheless, he makes some interesting points. Why do we need a new translation? Because, he says, translations always come with a lot of theological doctrinal baggage and it's never a bad idea to begin again at the beginning. So, this is the beginning of "repentance:" Jesus, through the gospel writer, calls the reader, calls you and me, to go beyond human understanding. To repent has nothing to do with our intellectual abilities. It is not a mental exercise. Rather, Jesus calls us to *change our hearts*, which in the ancient world meant our whole self. In order to do that, he says, we need to lay claim to God's good news, to have *faith* in it, and not merely believe it. And then, to come along after him.

A number of years ago, a friend of mine who is a cardio-thoracic surgeon pulled up in front of my house early one morning ... 4:00 a.m. early. He was taking me to observe open heart surgery that day because, as I remember him saying, "I thought since you work with matters of the heart you should know what a heart looks like." Great, no sweat, I can do this, I thought. I had worked as an ER chaplain in a trauma hospital for a few years and I had watched enough *ER*, *Chicago Hope*, and *Grey's Anatomy* episodes to qualify for taking the boards. Watching TV also taught me about the "observation deck," where medical students hung out to watch seasoned surgeons work their magic.

When we got to the hospital, I asked my friend about the observation deck. He looked at me and said: "What do you mean? You are scrubbing in. Come with me." Scrubbing in? That's not what I came here for. I was just going to watch ... from a safe distance. But not that day, he

insisted. And so I donned a pair of scrubs, washed my hands, and washed them again, and again, put on a cap, gloves and a mask and went into the operating room after him. He had me climb on a foot stool so I could look over his shoulder and follow every careful move of his steady hands until I finally saw it, saw it for the first time: a heart, a real heart, pulsating and pumping, beautiful and fragile at the same time. Sometimes it takes a friend to drag me along “to come and see.”

When Jesus challenges us to change our hearts, he challenges us to move from the observation deck to the real thing. Just watching is not going to get this done. More radically, meaning fundamentally, changing our hearts requires a heart transplant, to stay with the medical metaphor. It requires to transplant Jesus’ heart into our hearts. We do this by coming along after him, or, as it is translated traditionally, by following him. This is easier said than done because we are often so preoccupied with fishing for fish that we forget that Jesus wants us to fish for people. A good question to ask of ourselves, then, would be: What is it that we are fishing for? Is it a good job? Or money? Or status? Power? Influence? A bigger house, a greater deal? Safety and security? You fill in the blank. And at the same time, we need to ask: Who are the people we are *not* fishing for because we are preoccupied with other things? Our children, spouses, or partners? Our extended families? Our friends and co-workers? The people who sit next to us in the pew? The forgotten women, children, and men in our community? Again, you can fill in the blank.

Transplanting Jesus’ heart into our own hearts also means to live, to attempt to live, as Jesus lived who said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart.” Living gently and humbly in heart, Jesus promises us, will give us rest for our souls. Living gently and humbly in heart ... not an easy but a radical thing to do in a world where people who scream the loudest and say the most outrageous and obnoxious things are seemingly the only ones heard.

Last Monday, I went to the funeral of Rabbi Susan Talve’s and Rabbi Jim Goodman’s daughter. Her name was Adina Chaya which means “gentle life. Her story is well known so I am not betraying any confidence, but I want to tell you about her because you may not know her. Adina was born with a severe heart issue which physically restricted her being in the world. But it did not restrict her spirit. She lived fiercely and independently, and she loved God’s world and all the creatures therein, human and otherwise, with abandon. Adina did not care what people looked like, what they believed or didn’t believe, how old they were, how much they earned, or what they did or whom they loved. Everyone who spoke at her service said the same thing: they knew of no other person who shared her love as freely and generously as Adina did. Even when she got sicker, she did not change the way she loved as she lived up to and into the name which her parents gave her: Adina Chaya, “gentle life.”

As I sat among the mourners and listened to her family and friends, I realized: Adina had the change of heart of which Jesus, the Rabbi, spoke. She lived as Jesus would want every human being to live and love, gently and humbly in heart, as she was rooted deeply in her Jewish faith.

Which brings me back to my translation conundrum. “Repentance” doesn’t even come close to what Jesus challenges us to do and, more importantly, whom Jesus challenges us to be. Only a change of heart will do. Got change?

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