Luke 15 February 18, 2018

The First Sunday of Lent

*The Forgiveness of Jesus, Part 1*

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How many of you have seen the movie *The Blind Side*? It’s a great movie based on the true story of a white Christian family who took in a homeless young black man and gave him the chance to succeed. The young man’s name was Michael Oher. Michael not only overcame the hopelessness of his violent, drug-infested upbringing, but he became a good student and a head-turning high school and college football star. Michael Oher was the first-round NFL draft pick in 2009. At a recent fund-raiser, Michael’s adoptive father Sean Tuohy, noted that the transformation of his family and Michael all started with two words. When they spotted Michael walking along the road on a cold November morning in shorts and a T-shirt, Sean’s wife Leigh Ann Tuohy uttered two words that changed their world. She told Sean, “Turn around.” They turned the car around, put Michael in their warm vehicle, and ultimately adopted him into their family. Those same two words can change anyone’s life. When we turn around, we change direction and see something entirely new up ahead. To turn around in the Bible means to repent of where you were going and go full steam ahead God’s way.

This is what the prophets in the Old Testament were preaching day in and day out to the nation of Israel: Turn Around! Repent! Turn Around! Though God had declared his love for them, had clearly shown them the way of faithfulness and obedience, and had enacted astounding miracles on their behalf, they just kept going their own way. The prophets would then step in and in a lot of different ways give a one-word message: “Repent!” “Turn Around!” It’s the classic “If, then” statement. If you do this, then this will happen. If you keep going down this pathway, then you will have serious consequences to face ahead. But if you turn around and change direction, then the blessed things that God is longing to give you, is willing to give you, is ready to give you will find their way into your life.

Jesus proclaimed, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”* (Matthew 3:2). Throughout the New Testament we hear the same message. Repent! What if some Sunday I walked to the pulpit and just said one word: “Repent!” …and then sat down. Some of you would be very happy. “Wow, we’re going to get out early today!” Some of you might think, “I sure hope Susie over there heard that message. She sure needs to get herself turned around.” Some of you might wonder what I meant by the word “Repent.” Does she know something I don’t know? Others might know immediately and take it to heart.

To repent means to turn around and go a new way. When we were in Houston, I was the driver and Laurie was the navigator. Traffic there is horrendous. They have many, many places called a turn-around, probably just for visiting drivers like me! Laurie did a good job telling me which way to go but there were several times I missed a turn due to heavy traffic. One time, Keith Hart yells from the back seat, “two lanes! two lanes!” That’s not to mention the several times he yelled, “Dilly, dilly” for no good reason. We have a lot of voices in our lives shouting out instructions.

If we have put our faith in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit is living inside of us. Right now. If you have said “Yes!” to Jesus, the Holy Spirit is alive and well within you right now to mold your life into the image of Christ. Priscilla Shirer puts the process this way, *“After salvation, because of the Holy Spirit, certain kinds of activities, thoughts, or attitudes don’t feel comfortable to you anymore, even if they did before. Something you may have once done without concern now feels wrong and problematic – increasingly so over time. Participating in certain behaviors, entertaining certain habits, engaging in certain relationships may become awkward and difficult with little apparent reason. God’s Spirit is infiltrating your soul – influencing you, molding you. Your conscience is being conformed into the image of Christ.”* (*Discerning the Voice of God* study guide, p. 52)

Repentance is change. It is not penance, meaning suffering for our sin but not necessarily involving a change of character or conduct. Lying on a bed of spikes in order to punish yourself is penance, not repentance. Repentance is turn-around change.

Repentance is not remorse. Remorse is “I feel so bad that I did that” - walking around with guilt and shame wrapped around your neck. Remorse by itself doesn’t involve change. It just keeps the sinner in a place of self-condemnation or self-loathing (which is one of Satan’s favorite tactics to keep us from true repentance). Repentance is not remorse or self-condemnation. Repentance is turn-around change.

In our Lenten video teaching this week in small groups you will hear insights into the parable of the prodigal son from Luke 15. The teacher on the video, Dr. Matt Chandler, does a great job of taking us into the historical context of the parable, and into the minds and hearts of the prodigal son and the forgiving father. In this story, the son, all of a sudden, wakes up. He has taken his inheritance money from his father, run away into the land of the gentiles, and has spent every penny. He has lost everything and is truly desiring the food the pigs are eating, for he has no food at all. He realizes, all at once, how far he has fallen. He realizes that he is jealous of how good the pigs have it, an animal that was considered unclean and therefore untouchable in Jewish culture. Repentance is change that begins with a wake-up call. It is a moment in time we hear and respond to those words, “Turn around.” Stop with the hard-heartedness, stop with the cynicism, stop with the judgement, stop with the making-fun, stop with the laziness, stop with the gossip, stop with the verbal, mental, emotional, or physical abuse of a person or people in your life, stop with the unkind words meant to cut down, stop with the pornography, stop with the refusal to listen, stop with the poor management of time, stop with the complaining and grumbling, stop with the poor-me attitude, stop with the sexual immorality, stop with trying to control every little thing, stop with the swearing, stop with the abuse of your own body, stop with the relinquishment of your mind to mindless pursuits. Stop lying, cheating, stealing, coveting … Stop doing these things and turn around! Turn toward God who sees you coming and runs to welcome you with open arms.

We read this Scripture from Luke 15:7 in our call to worship, *“There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”* Why? Why so much rejoicing over one sinner who repents? Because when we repent, it means we have come home to God. We look to Him and say, “Help me, God. I can’t conquer this on my own.” “Save me, Jesus. I am helpless to save myself.” “Restore me, Lord. I’m sorry that I believed my own way was better than your way.”

Before us now is a cross that we put up last Sunday after worship. We had a great team of people who stayed an extra 45 minutes to an hour to put this all in place. It takes some doing to get the purple curtain up there just right, to get the rocks out of the “secret room” behind the organ, and to put everything else in place. If you’ve ever stayed to help you know that there is always some joking and laughter while we do our work, and that’s okay. It’s good fellowship – working alongside one another doing kingdom work. But we know that the cross is no laughing matter.

On a roughly made cross filled with sharp splinters, not a nicely made, smooth one like this, Jesus Christ was hung with spikes in his hands and feet. He knew it was coming. From the beginning of time he knew he was headed to that moment when the hammers found their mark. He knew all along this was what he was sent to do. And he never turned away. He never needed a “Turn Around” from his Father in heaven. Never. His resolve to do what only He could do blows my mind, captures my heart, and saved my soul.

Just when I was typing this my daughter Katy called. She is having awful stomach issues because of all the meds she’s on from the infection post-surgery. But she said this to me, “It just makes me think about people who have to take chemo. They go in there, they get this needle stuck into them, and they know there are going to be horrid side-effects, but they do it anyway because the alternative is death.”

This is why Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem and execution by crucifixion – because the alternative for all those God made – is a sentence of eternal death – meaning eternal separation from God. And so he took the death blow for us. Jesus just couldn’t turn around and walk away. His love for you and me is to too wide, too high, too long, and too deep to do otherwise. There was no alternative for him.

If you have not put your faith in Jesus Christ as the only one who can save your soul from eternal death, from eternal separation from God, from eternal imprisonment to the sin that so easily entangles you, today is a great day to plant your flag saying “This is as far as I’m going. No further.” Today is a great day to plant that flag, then turn around and start going the way of Life. You might not understand it all, how Jesus’ death brought about new life for you, I don’t understand it all! But by faith, and not by sight, I believe. My faith has found a resting place, and as that great hymn by the same name goes, “I need no other argument, I need no other plea; it is enough that Jesus died, and that he died for me.”

Repent! Turn around! Don’t buy into the message you hear from the back seat, “Two lanes! Two lanes!” One lane, folks. One lane. One body, one Spirit, one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all (Ephesians 4:4-6). One way, one truth, one life – no one comes to the Father except through Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord. Repent! Turn Around! Come home to Christ! *(Time for silent prayers of confession, repentance, & re/commitment.)*

In the Protestant tradition there are only two Sacraments – Communion & Baptism. A Sacrament makes visible something that is invisible. In the case of communion, we make visible what Christ did at the final Passover meal he shared with his disciples. With these words he began, he established, he instituted what we now do together in worship to remember what he has done for us. *“Our Lord Jesus, on the night on which he was betrayed, took the bread. After giving thanks he blessed it and broke it and gave it to his disciples saying, “Take, eat. This is my body broken for you.” Then, taking the cup also he said, “This is the new covenant, sealed in my blood and poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Drink of it, all of you.”* This is one important way all year long, but especially during Lent, that we keep the cross before us. For some of us, perhaps more for women & for children, communion with Christ might look like (or feel like) sitting beside Jesus on the couch, laying our heads on his shoulder with his arm firmly but gently around us holding us close. For others, perhaps more for men, communion with Christ might look like (or feel like) an eye-to-eye firm but gentle handshake as we say, “Thank you,” and he says, “You’re welcome.” And you are. By his blood shed for us and his body broken for us, you are able and welcome to come home to Christ.

Behold the Lamb who bears our sins away, slain for us - and we remember   
The promise made that all who come in faith find forgiveness at the cross.   
So we share in this bread of life, and we drink of His sacrifice   
As a sign of our bonds of peace around the table of the King.   
  
The body of our Savior Jesus Christ, torn for you - eat and remember   
The wounds that heal, the death that brings us life paid the price to make us one.   
So we share in this bread of life, and we drink of His sacrifice   
As a sign of our bonds of peace around the table of the King.   
  
The blood that cleanses every stain of sin, shed for you - drink and remember   
He drained death’s cup that all may enter in to receive the life of God.   
So we share in this bread of life, and we drink of His sacrifice   
As a sign of our bonds of peace around the table of the King.   
  
And so with thankfulness and faith we rise to respond, - and to remember   
Our call to follow in the steps of Christ as His body here on earth.   
So we share in this bread of life, and we drink of His sacrifice   
As a sign of our bonds of peace around the table of the King.  (Getty Music)

Amen.