



The Church Comes Alive:
The Need to Repent and Be Baptized
Acts 2:37-41

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Are you mired in acts of sin, or indifference, or bitterness? Do you wish that there was away out of the trap of that sin? Christ grants that to us through the power that is his as the crucified and resurrected Son of God.

Scripture

Acts 2:37-41

³⁷ Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, 'Brothers, what should we do?' ³⁸ Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

³⁹ For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.'

⁴⁰ And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.'

⁴¹ So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.

Sermon

My junior prom was held at a downtown hotel in San Diego. I was from a rural town and the high school I attended was in a suburban town. San Diego was the big city and I was not used to the big city. My problem with downtown San Diego was that all the streets were one way. Early on I got on the wrong street, heading the wrong way. It did not take me long at all to get thoroughly lost; so lost in fact that some how or another I wound up at the entrance to a highly secure U.S. Naval Base. The guard at the gate was very insistent that I stop. When I asked him how to get to the U.S. Grant Hotel, he said that he didn't have any idea but that I had to turn around and head back. My poor date! She had to endure all this from the klutz in the peach tux. Surprisingly, it was the last time that we went out.

The word that Peter uses here is the same word that the guard used at the Naval Base. It is the word “repent.” In the Greek the word repent is metanoia and it means “to turn around.” Having faced the crowds that heard his sermon with the truth about their culpability in the death of Jesus, the crowd asks what they can do. Peter tells them to turn around, to repent.

It’s funny because when we hear the word “repent” it sounds so old-fashioned, and so judgmental. The picture that I conjure up in my mind’s eye is a New Yorker style comic with a destitute looking man in a dilapidated robe standing on an urban street with a sign that says, “Repent: The End is Near.” It’s comical, loaded for a punch line, and it’s far-fetched, and it feels very judgmental. But if we remove the word from its modern intonation and we allow it its original meaning, it’s a highly relevant and important word. “Turn around.” Stop heading in the wrong direction and turn toward the right direction.

Peter is telling the crowd who has come to hear him that they are moving away from God and that they need to turn around and head back to God. He wants them to stop being involved in the death of Christ and start participating in the life that can only come through Christ. He explicitly invites them to leave the misplaced corruption of their culture and to return to the life that God intends for them and has made available through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, Jesus.

How many of us here this morning have had times in our lives that mirrored my trip to downtown San Diego? How many have spent way too much time on a wrong way road, stubbornly looking for our destination, becoming ever more lost, and winding up in forbidden and forbidding places? Some of you can look upon this experience in your past; for others here this morning you are on that one-way wrong-way road right now.

Most of us, and particularly most of us raised in the church, here repent and we instantly conjure up in our minds a list of things from which we have been told to repent: We should not smoke drink or chew or go with those who do. And for some this morning the list of American middle-class sins is your challenge. You have succumbed to the one way streets of alcohol, drugs, sex. I don’t mean to minimize any of those behavioral sins. If you have or do struggle with them, then you now how entrapping they are, and how necessary it is to turn around from them.

But there are other one-way streets that lead away from God’s good presence. Indifference is a bad one-way street, and one that is championed by our corrupt culture. It is the sin that Peter has just named to the gathered crowd. One the Son of Man was placed upon the cross, no one stood up for him. To ignore Jesus is the same as to reject Jesus. To reject Jesus is to be heading away from God.

The Christian faith begins with repentance, with a decision to turn around and to actively move toward God. Mark Labberton describes a conversation that he had with someone who did not understand the metanoia foundation of coming into true relationship with Christ:

One day a man came to my office looking for help in making sense of the nightly conversations about Christianity he was having with his newly converted wife. He made it clear he was very busy, very successful and didn’t really have much time for this – just some bullet points, now, please. It would have been easy for me to hand him some books or pamphlets, and while those can be good, instead I said, “I can see you are a busy and successful person, so I don’t think what you’re asking for is a good idea.” Frustrated, he asked why. “Because,” I explained, “if I were to give you some bullet points, and you were to really understand them, they would have such a significant way of working into your life that it could really mess things up. You would have to rethink the meaning of success, of time, of family, of everything really. I don’t think you want to that, do you?”

“No,” he said.

“Exactly,” I replied.

“Well, at least I don’t think so,” he stammered. “Maybe that’s what we need to talk about first.”¹

Let's be honest: the decision to turn round, to repent, is a life-altering decision. It places your life where it heads toward God and the values of Jesus. And this Jesus to whom we turn is the one who identified himself with the hungry, the thirsty, the dispossessed, and the marginalized. We, as the Body of Christ, need to love and care for the marginalized here in our church, in our neighborhoods, in our country, and in a world that is filled with those with AIDS, those who are hungry, with young people forced into military action, with children sold into sexual and other forms of slavery. Christ died for this world, and for us to ignore that world is to be on a one way street with away from Jesus.

To move toward Jesus also means to move toward his Body, the church. And here, I believe is a real area of repentance for this church. You have said of yourselves, in your own self-study that you have hurt one another and that you have not always treated each other in a Christ-like manner. Repent. But let's repent in its truest sense, meaning let's turn around. A pork roast left in its marinade for too long becomes mealy. Let's don't marinate in our own failures as a church, let's get to cooking. Let's turn around and move with joy and dedication toward Christ and his mission.

Peter's sermon here is a virtual repeat of Jesus' first sermon, and Jesus' first sermon is a repeat of John the Baptist's first sermon. Each of those sermons centered on the turning around of repentance, and then they led to the new beginnings of Baptism.

The act of baptism is that symbol that our re-birth, our new beginning, our turn around toward God, is purely a gift from God. The washing away of our old sins, the rising up into the new life of Christ's resurrection is to be found in the waters of baptism. If we have been baptized then, the scriptures say, we have become a new creation. The grace of Christ is given to us; grace that has taken away our sins but grace as well to live a new life.

Are you mired in acts of sin, or indifference, or bitterness? Do you wish that there was away out of the trap of that sin? Christ grants that to us through the power that is his as the crucified and resurrected Son of God. His power is sufficient; baptism reminds us of that truth.

C.S. Lewis writes of the way in which Christ's power overcomes the trappings of our sin – a sin from which we cannot rid ourselves – when he describes the “de-dragoning” of Eustace in the Voyage of the Dawn Treader:

“Well, anyway, I looked up and saw the very last thing I expected: a huge lion coming slowly toward me. and one queer thing was that there was no moon last night, but there was moonlight where the lion was. So it came nearer and nearer. I was terribly afraid of it. you may think that, being a dragon, I could have knocked any lion out easily enough. But it wasn't that kind of fear. I wasn't afraid of it eating me, I was just afraid of it – if you can understand. Well, it came close up to me and looked straight into my eyes. And I shut my eyes tight. But that wasn't any good because it told me to follow it.”

You mean it spoke?”

“I don't know. Now that you mention it, I don't think it did. But it told me all the same. And I knew I'd have to do that it told me, so I got up and followed it. and it led me a long way into the mountains. And there was always this moonlight over and round the lion wherever we went. So at last we came to the top of a mountain I'd n ever seen before and on the top of this mountain there was a garden – trees and fruit and everything. In the middle of it there was a well. “I knew it was a well because you could see the water bubbling up from the bottom of it: but it was a lot bigger than most wells – like a very big, round bath with marble steps going down into it. the water was as clear as anything and I thought if I could get in there and bathe it would ease the pain in my leg. But the lion told me I must undress first. Mind you, I don't know if he said any words out loud or not.

“I was just going to say that I couldn't undress because I hadn't any clothes on when I suddenly thought that dragons are snaky sort of things and snakes can cast their skins. Oh, of course, thought I, that's what the lion means. So I started scratching myself and my scales began coming off all over the place. And then I scratched a little deeper and, instead of just scales coming off here and there, my whole skin started peeling off beautifully, like it does after an illness, or as if I

was a banana. In a minute or two I just stepped out of it. I could see it lying there beside me, looking rather nasty. It was a most lovely feeling. So I started to go down into the well for my bathe.

“But just as I was going to put my feet into the water I looked down and saw that they were all hard and rough and wrinkled and scaly just as they had been before. Oh, that’s all right, said I, it only means I had another smaller suit on underneath the first one, and I’ll have to get out of it too. so I scratched and tore again and this underskin peeled off beautifully and out I stepped and left it lying beside the other one and went down to the well for my bathe. “Well, exactly the same thing happened again. And I thought to myself, oh dear, how ever many skins have I got to take off? For I was longing to bathe my leg. So I scratched away for the third time and got off a third skin, just like the two others, and stepped out of it. But as soon as I looked at myself in the water I knew it had been no good.

“Then the lion said – but I don’t know if it spoke – ‘You will have to let me undress you.’ I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it.

“The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought I had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I’ve ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it wa just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off. You know – if you’ve ever picked the scab of a sore place. It hurts like billy-oh but it is such fun to see it coming away.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” said Edmund.

“Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off – just as I thought I’d done it myself the other three times, only they hadn’t hurt – and there it was lying on the grass: only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobby-looking than the others had been. And there was I as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been. Then he caught hold of me – I didn’t like that much for I was very tender underneath now that I’d no skin on – and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing I found that all the pain had gone from my arm. And then I saw why. I’d turned into a boy again. You’d think me simply phony if I told you how I felt about my own arms. I know they’ve no muscle and are pretty mouldy compared with Caspian’s, but I was so glad to see them.

This is a story of metanoia, of returning to what God intends us to be, and of the new beginning of baptism. Christ offers the same to us. Let’s turn away from our sins, let’s turn toward God, let’s be God’s people sold out to God’s mission in the world, let’s be the washed and reborn baptized people of God.

¹ Mark Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Worship* (InterVarsity Press, 2007), p64.

² C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (HarperCollins Publishers, 1980), p113-116.