

“What Calls Us to Repentance?”

Luke 13:1-9

Dr. Christopher C. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

March 24, 2019

As some of you may know, in my previous setting, I accumulated a number of interesting items behind the pulpit. I'm not sure how it started and it wouldn't work here because our historic pulpit is too small, though I must say that every time the Tar Heels have beaten my beloved Wildcats, someone, usually someone named Bob Kimball, has left something pale blue on the pulpit, a sweatshirt or hat or... something.

But at Knollwood in Winston-Salem someone left a plastic duck the same day Frank Tupper, my former theology professor, joined the church. Someone left a plastic pink flamingo in honor of a former Knollwood minister who left flamingos everywhere. There were Star Trek characters, a battery-operated fan, a stuffed lion and many other items, most of which I have to this day. It looked odd to guest preachers. And when children saw the toys, they said, “So that's what Dr. Chapman does during worship!” But the truth is I kept the items there so that the preacher would never take him/herself too seriously.

One item I want to call attention to today was a dispenser of Wash Away Your Sins Hand Cleanser. It claimed to reduce sin by 98.9% or more; to have a tempting, do it again, Easter lily scent; and to have been tested and approved for all seven deadly sins. I am not making this up! The directions for use read as follows. “1. Bow head. 2. Engage water supply. 3. Pump a generous amount of hand cleanser into palm. 4. Rub hands together religiously. 5. Rinse. 6. Repent.” The label indicated that tougher sins might require additional application.

Sin is not a joking matter, and repentance is a serious venture, but these are not exactly the most popular topics to consider in the year of our Lord 2019. It takes something interesting to draw people in, to get people's attention, not just because we don't want to consider our brokenness and need, but because repentance itself has been reduced to such a narrow focus.

Far too often people think of repentance as a pointed, negative process of condemning people, a real-life embodiment of the cartoon “Hellfire and Dalmatians” wherein a preaching Dalmatian barks to the canine congregation, “And he said unto them, ‘No, no! Bad dog!’”

Repentance is an arduous task, but it is a broader concern than this, and it is an ennobling and life-giving venture. We need something to draw us in, whether it is humor or something else; we need something to get our attention and call us to the kind of change repentance involves.

In the story we have read today from Luke 13, Jesus calls people to repentance by underscoring the frailty of life. People come to him with the tragic news that some Galileans on pilgrimage have been killed in the temple, along with the animals they brought to sacrifice, by Pilate’s soldiers. The implied question seems to be whether they have died because they are worse sinners. It is a common assumption in this time, and sadly still in ours, that suffering is a direct result of sin and thus, if you suffer mightily, you must have done something really bad.

Many sermons have been preached in an effort to disentangle sin and suffering, but this isn’t the heart of Jesus’ concern. He answers the question directly but almost dismissively. “Did they die because they were worse sinners? No, of course not. Who would think such a ridiculous thing? But life is fragile,” he goes on to say, “none of us knows which day is our last. If you have a need for repentance, to change your life, to get things right with God, don’t delay, do it now!”

He illustrates his point with a story about a fig tree that is not producing fruit. For those who do not like figs, this may not seem like a problem, but for those of us who do, it is. Furthermore, as I recall the fig tree in my grandparents’ yard in Lincolnton, these trees spread out like bushes and take up a lot of soil. They are not really beautiful. So, if they are not bearing fruit, and they are taking up valuable soil, well...

The owner in Jesus’ story wants the tree cut down. The gardener pleads for one more year, and the owner agrees, but only one more year. In like manner, Jesus says, if we need to repent, we may be extended some grace, a bit more time, but there is a limit to how much. So, we should feel a sense of urgency about the changes we need to make.

Humor may get us to think about repentance, but the frailty of life creates a sense of urgency that might just propel us to practice it. And then, it might also help us to know what repentance involves.

We begin by understanding that repentance is not just about feeling regret; it's about making changes in our lives. It is not enough to feel badly about abusive behavior; we have to stop the abuse. It is not enough to feel sorry about an addiction and the mess it causes for us and people we love; we need to seek help for the addiction. It is not enough to dump our anger on others, express half-hearted regret and say, "This is just how I am;" genuine contrition is required in addition to an honest effort to handle our anger better. Repentance is about a change of life.

Some of you will know that my father is English and served in the SAS in the late 1950s and early 1960s, mostly in the Middle East. He has never talked much about that work for a number of reasons, but he loves to tell the story about an officer with a stuttering problem in his training days at Sandhurst. As a group of recruits marched toward a pond, he tried to get out the command, "To the rear march," but kept getting stuck on that first t. The first few recruits got knee-deep in water before he got out the command and they could turn around... Well, at least he got the command out before they all drowned.

Repentance often works this way. We seem to take forever to make the changes we need to make, but the key is that we make them before we drown in our own dysfunction. And the essence of what is involved is a change of direction, not just feeling regret.

If we are to understand what repentance involves, we also need to know that it is not just about giving up old ways of life; it's about taking on new ways. You don't stop a two-year-old from playing in the toilet; you attract the two-year-old to the block table. There are things we need to give up, but there are also things we need to take on, and the thought of moving toward something positive is a more powerful motivation than the thought of giving up something negative. Repentance involves both, but as Frederick Buechner once said, it spends less time looking to the past and saying, "I'm sorry," than it does the future and saying, "Wow!"

The film *Chocolat* explores many themes related to Lent as a mother and daughter scandalize a French town by opening a chocolate store near the church. The community experiences profound woes beneath the thin veneer of a pious appearance. This twosome shocks the community into a deeper appreciation of life. One character says this.

Do I want to speak of the miracle of our Lord's divine transformation? Not really, no. I don't want to talk about his divinity. I'd rather talk about his humanity. I mean, you know, how he lived his life, here on Earth. His kindness, his tolerance... Listen, here's what I think. I think that we can't go around... measuring our goodness by what we don't do, by what we deny ourselves, what we resist, and who we exclude. I think... we've got to measure goodness by what we embrace, what we create... and who we include.

Indeed, we cannot measure goodness simply by what we don't do. Such an approach to penitence and piety does not square with the words of the prophets or the teachings of Jesus. Goodness, repentance, following Jesus, is about what we do for others.

So, if we are going to be moved to repentance, it helps us to know that it's about making changes, not just feeling regret; and it helps us to know that it's about taking on new ways, not just giving up old ways. And then, it helps us to know that it is a communal responsibility, not just an individual one.

We think of repentance as an individual act, which is not a great surprise, given our nation's obsession with individualism, and how much Baptists have focused on individual freedoms and responsibilities. Individual faith matters, but in the Bible, it's not just individuals who are called to repentance; communities are as well; indeed, entire nations are.

Prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Joel call all the people to repent - the whole nation. And in Nineveh, it's not just the people who take on sackcloth and ashes - much to Jonah's regret because he wants to see them perish - but the animals in the land also repent!

So, while we consider our individual needs for repentance, we might consider our communal and national needs as well. Might we repent from our

central sins of racism, sexism and materialism? Might we repent from our obsession with pleasure, our love of celebrity, our lust for violence and all that goes with it? Might we repent from our divisiveness and idolatrous devotion to party and ideology? Might we repent in a positive way by treating all people with dignity, welcoming the stranger, filling our hearts with the love of God and neighbor?

It may seem impossible. Change is difficult for individuals and nations. I think of a conversation I had with a man who worked at a clothing store in Winston-Salem. I pointed out that I wear out the edge of the pants pockets first on any suit because I put my hands in the pockets. "If I could stop doing that," I said, "My suits would last longer." He shook his head and said, "We don't change who we are."

Indeed, we don't change our basic character, but if we never change, I am in the wrong profession, as are all ministers, teachers, coaches and counselors. I don't believe we never change. We just need the right motivation, which a sense of urgency can provide, and we need to know what it is we are changing to as individuals and as a nation.

In an issue of *Breaking Free*, the newsletter of Forsyth Jail and Prison Ministries, Chaplain Ingrid Hackett described a chapel service in which one inmate told the others his story. He shot a man over an illegal transaction. While in prison he accepted Christ, realized the wrongness of his actions and longed for an opportunity to apologize. As it turned out, an opportunity was very close. A man across the room said he had been shot and nearly died but after he recovered, he went back to crime until he ended up serving time. Yet while incarcerated, he too accepted Christ. The second man then asked the first man, the man who shot him, to forgive him. The two men moved to the center of the room where they embraced and accepted each other's forgiveness.

What were the chances either of these lives would turn around? What were the chances both would change, meet again and practice forgiveness? Yet people do change. The God who was in Christ transforms lives that are open. Repentance is how we open them.