

“Seeking the Right Kind of Treatment for Our Condition”

Joel 2:1, 12–14; Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

March 2, 2022

As many of you know, I have been struggling with a back issue that affects my legs as well for several months now. I had a first acute episode of cramping and pain in mid-November, after which I took a few days off from running and then resumed normal activity. But I had a second, more severe episode in early December and had to take this condition more seriously.

I did some stretching on my own, established a tentative diagnosis of sciatica, using all of my medical training, of course, which is none. I even saw a massage therapist, and he said I might want to see a physical therapist and check with my doctor. But the male cranium is thick, it takes persistent pain to persuade us to seek help, and my doctor and friend in another setting once said that medicine is the art of amusing the patient while nature takes care of the healing. I didn't think I needed amusing, but nature alone did not resolve the condition.

So, I finally saw a physical therapist and checked with my doctor. The new diagnosis is two bulging discs in my lower back. Thankfully no surgery is necessary. Physical therapy is resolving the issue gradually. I was feeling really good about this until I talked with Ian. He had a back injury and similar treatment, and I thought he'd have an encouraging word. “Yeah, Dad,” he said, “So, welcome to the back issue world. You'll get better, but you'll be dealing with it the rest of your life.” Wonderful, I thought, and he used to call me the bluebird of happiness... but I am getting better. I just needed the right kind of treatment for my condition.

We all face a similar challenge in regard to our spiritual condition. We experience many different symptoms of our frailty and sin, our alienation from God, one another, and our own best selves. But we all have thick craniums when it comes to matters of the spirit. Our first

response to various symptoms of disease is to deny the seriousness of our condition. Stanley Hauerwas once compared our reaction to prayers of confession to the commercial where an actor says, “I’m not a doctor, but I play one on TV.” We say, “I’m not a real sinner, but I play one in worship.” Hauerwas says we know we are not perfect, but most of us think we are good enough, we lead conventional lives, we’re just not that sinful (*Journal for Preachers*, Lent, 2019, p. 38).

And yet, even our denial is a kind of acknowledgment. We think we are play acting when we confess sin, but the truth, says Tom Long, is that we are not pretending to be sinners, we are sinners pretending not to be sinful. Long uses Soren Kierkegaard’s image of a drunk man who is not so drunk that he has lost consciousness. He is definitely conscious of the fact that he is a little drunk, and that is why he works so hard to conceal it (*Journal for Preachers*, Lent, 2022, p. 25). We work tirelessly to conceal our condition, to hide even from ourselves.

The trouble is we can only hide so long. Denial has a shelf life. We may have a secret anxiety about the truth, to use Kierkegaard’s language, a fear of learning too much about ourselves, but eventually the symptoms of spiritual need — guilt, alienation, emptiness, despair — become so painful that we are willing to seek help. Yet, as with any physical issue, we need the right kind of treatment for our condition.

So, what is the treatment? It’s a process of spiritual discernment wherein we are honest with ourselves and willing to make changes. The old word is *repentance*. We often think the first step is acknowledgment, a willingness to name our need for help. And acknowledgment is necessary. But how do we get to the place where we are willing to do this? Few of us are moved to confess by someone badgering us. There might have been a day when someone like me pointing a bony finger of judgment might have called people to repentance, especially if shouting and sweating were involved. Bill Leonard’s fundamentalist grandmother in Texas said of preachers, “If he don’t sweat, I don’t listen!” But that doesn’t work anymore.

So, what does? Well, what motivates us to seek medical care? For me, part of the answer was persistent pain, but another part was belief

that there was a way to get better, that effective treatment was available. We are moved to confession not just because we know we are frail and inadequate, but because we believe that God is merciful. “Return to the Lord, your God,” says the prophet Joel, “for God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love...” Repentance begins not with us hating ourselves, but with us trusting in God’s mercy, and believing that in the context of love, something better is possible.

Some parents say to their children, “I love you; you know that, I hope. Nothing can ever change that reality. You can tell me anything. I may or may not like what I hear, but nothing will take away my love for you.” The children who believe their parents when they say this feel a freedom to be honest when they really need to be. This is what God says to us and this is how repentance begins.

The next step in our treatment involves a change of heart. “Rend your hearts and not your garments,” says Joel. What matters is not the formal expression of repentance but the inner desire to change. This is Jesus’ concern in our reading from the Sermon on the Mount. Making a public show of giving alms, offering prayers, and fasting betrays a desire for recognition, not a yearning from deep within for change.

Some question, therefore, whether there isn’t some irony in this service — aren’t we making a public show of our repentance? If we are, what we are making a show of is our frailty, for this is what the ashes on our foreheads represent. But it is true that what matters is not our outer expression but our inner condition. Rend your hearts, and not your garments, says Joel. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also, says Jesus. What matters is a yearning for something better.

But if we have that kind of yearning, we experience more than a change of heart. Our actions change too, our lives change. In the early church, baptismal liturgies included a graphic demonstration of this reality. Baptismal candidates would first face west and then be invited to spit on Satan and all his empty promises, to renounce the ways of evil. Then, they would turn toward the east, reorient themselves, and give witness to their new commitment to Christ. As they turned, they would

see that the priests had changed vestments. They would be wearing dazzling gold, a symbol of God's kingdom to which they now belonged.

Baptism meant not just a few minor changes in beliefs and behavior; it meant a change in citizenship. They were leaving a land of darkness and evil, aggression and control, to enter a land of light and love, kindness and compassion.

That's what baptism is, that's what repentance is. It is not just feeling remorse; it is choosing a different path. It involves letting go of less noble habits and thoughts and taking on nobler ones. What might we let go of that is getting in the way of our potential? Does anger have to control us? Does self-obsession feed our souls? Do we really need whatever has become a crutch? And what might we take on to live further into our calling? Is this the time to start volunteering in the clothing ministry or at Habitat for Humanity? Is this the year to start visiting the sick and homebound? Is this the year to start bringing more kindness and compassion to our workplace or school, or to make a commitment to spiritual discipline? Repentance involves giving up and taking on certain habits and thoughts, a change of heart and behavior.

But it's about more than changing a few habits; it's about a reorientation of life. That is our deepest need, the one that gives rise to an array of symptoms. Paying attention to the symptoms is fine, but only by addressing the underlying concern can we become whole.

In the first Harry Potter film, there is a scene in which Professor Snape confronts Professor Quirrell. Snape concludes by saying, "We'll have another little chat soon, when you've had time to decide where your loyalties lie." We don't know what to make of this at the time. Where are Snape's loyalties? But over time we learn about Quirrell's loyalties and Snape's, and they are not what we might think.

In the end, it's about loyalties, in Harry Potter and in our lives. Our loyalty is to a God of love in whose grace we have the potential to become more. Once we understand this, once we believe this in our hearts, everything changes. Like back issues, our spiritual condition is an ongoing reality, but all of our efforts are carried out in the context of grace, not to earn God's favor. We don't need spiritual surgery, just a kind of ongoing spiritual therapy, to remain whole.