



## December 10, 2017 - Re-Turn Given by Rev. Mattei

*"I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."* (Mark 1:8)

"Repentance" is a repeated word in today's readings from Scripture. It seems to be at the foundation of this new highway to be prepared for the Lord "in the wilderness." (Isaiah 40:3)

Our confirmation students completed a year long study on Luther's Small Catechism last Saturday. They have covered The Ten Commandments, The Apostles' Creed, The Lord's Prayer, the Sacraments and other odds and ends including How to Stay Awake in Church.

Those of you who have attended my New Members' Classes have heard me say, just as I told our Confirmands, that the ELCA recognizes two sacraments (Baptism and Holy Communion) but also that Martin Luther considered Confession and Absolution a third sacrament.<sup>1</sup>

Officially, "a sacrament is an act that is commanded by Christ, uses a material or earthly element, and through connection with the Word is the bearer of God's promise."<sup>2</sup> Because Sacraments transmit God's grace they are also known as the Means of Grace. It is clear how Holy Baptism and Holy Communion include both Jesus' command and an earthly element (water, bread and wine). Confession and Absolution does not seem to have an element associated with it. Even though we call it the Sacrament of the Keys<sup>3</sup> there is no element to speak of apart from the experience of relationships being mended and community rebuilt.

The apostle Peter in his 2nd letter reminds us that all the noise will pass and everything done under the sun will be revealed, and so he asks: "...what sort of persons ought you to be in leading *lives of holiness and godliness*, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God...?" (2 Pt 3:11-12) In my view, "*lives of holiness and godliness*" refers not to perfection but to connection. When we are true and connected to the Word of God in us, it does not take long

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<sup>1</sup> Tappert, TG ed. "The Book of Concord". Fortress Press, 1959, pp. 221 & 445.

<sup>2</sup> ELCA: Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions: What is a sacrament for Lutherans?

<sup>3</sup> The Office of the Keys is the special authority which Christ has given to His Church on earth: to forgive the sins of the penitent sinners, but to retain the sins of the impenitent as long as they do not repent. John 20:22-23: "Jesus breathed on His disciples and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; and if you re-tain the sins of any, they are retained.'"

to recognize the Word of God challenging us to repent, even if this Word should come from weird people in wild places. We have made of “repentance” a moral requirement for a spotless life. This way, conversion and Christianity become a demanding goal, a self-flagellating and unsustainable effort impossible to achieve. Christianity has become another enslaving Idol impossible to satisfy. We have called this demand “discipleship” and we have promised spiritual growth and eternal bliss. We have taught people that if they do the right thing, say the right words and avoid certain behaviors they will be met with the proper reward in the after-life. Christianity has become a long list of demands to fulfil for delayed gratification. The impossibility to fulfil all those demands has frustrated and turned off quite a number of Christians who were met not with encouragement but only with judgment. This kind of repentance is still ego-centered and based on work-righteousness.

Repentance is not really about the acknowledgment of our inconsistency and lack of achieving a higher moral ground but about the disconnect that we create and maintain between people and God. Repentance is about “turning around”, looking at the world from a different perspective, from the perspective of those who suffer because of our choices and actions or lack of. Repentance is looking not from the center (me) out, but from those at the margins in.

John’s message is as important now as it was then: If you want to know what Christ’s coming means, you may need to strip down a bit, get down into the water, walk into the wild, and see the world from the bottom up. “Repent” isn’t a moral thing; it doesn’t mean, “*Be a better person!*” It’s about perspective: Turn around. Turn your head. See the world differently. Only with fresh eyes will we be able to see what God is up to in Jesus—the Son of God who is Good News. Can you see the world through the eyes of the oppressed, the impoverished, the violated, the hungry, the persecuted?

Paul encourages a change of mind. He writes, “May the mind that is in Christ Jesus also be in you” (Philippians 2:5). This is the truest depth of our Christian tradition, what it truly means to be a disciple of Jesus. “*Putting on the mind of Christ*” . . . [is] *what we are actually supposed to be doing on this path: not just admiring Jesus, but acquiring his consciousness.*<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, Christianity has become so concerned with orthodoxy, professing the correct doctrine and making sure everybody believes that Jesus is God (i.e. faith *in* Jesus) that we have largely ignored orthopraxis, practicing his teachings on love, simplicity, forgiveness, nonviolence, and generosity (i.e. the faith *of* Jesus).

Could it be that now is the time, at long last, for Christians to migrate to the vision shared by its original middle-Eastern founder and his original followers? If Christian faith can be redefined in this way, if our prime contribution to humanity can be shifted from teaching correct beliefs to connecting people to the source of Love and to one another, practicing the way of love as Jesus taught, then our whole understanding and experience of the church could be transformed into a school of love.

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<sup>4</sup> Episcopal priest Rev. Dr. Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind—a New Perspective on Christ and His Message* (Shambhala: 2008), 29.

Repentance for the Church might mean that we re-turned to the art of mentoring people in a life of prayer, of humility and simplicity, a generous life of forgiveness and reconciliation, of love, from the heart, for God, for all people (no exceptions), and for all creation. . .

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Mk 1:4) One is coming who will baptize in the Holy Spirit. (Mk 1:8) Repent.