

## Repentance; Or, the Change that Heals

2 Chronicles 7:14; Mark 1:14-15; Matthew 9:9

Why preach on repentance? One reason is that it was a chapter in the book on healing our broken world that we have been using as a guide this summer. Another, more important is this, what both Brian McClaren and Richard Rohr call “The Cult of Innocence” in the church. We choose to pretend together that we are mostly innocent, that there’s not much wrong we do. Such denial keeps us from healing and wholeness.

That word “repentance” can give us the heebie-jeebies. You’ve seen it on hand-scrawled signs along highways. You’ve heard it yelled by T.V. preachers. The message: Repent, Or Else!

In the old Pink Panther movies Inspector Clouseau, played by Peter Sellers, gets on the final nerve of his police-chief boss. Every time he walks into his office. The police chief starts twitching in one eye, like a nervous tick. Some of us have the same reaction to the word “repent.”

The other morning I woke up groggy and put what I thought was a vitamin D gummy in my mouth. What it was was a liquid fish oil capsule! That’s the taste some people get in their mouth when they hear the word “repent.” But it just may heal their heart.

So, today I'm going to preach a sermon on repentance without using the word "repent." I'm going to substitute the word *change*, for that is what the word means—to change. And it can be a healing thing.

Theodor Geisel, aka Dr. Seuss, says that children's books need to address one of the seven needs of children, and one of them is the need to change. Change and grow. So let's explore healing change today.

## I

2 Chronicles 7:14 is a verse often cited today. You hear it at National Prayer Breakfasts, at rallies to make America "Christian" again:

If my people who are called by my name humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and heal their land.

I've also heard this verse sited in black churches, and the words seem so different, feel so different. It's about making America *America*: just and equal, free and fair.

And what about the word "humble"? What does it mean to "humble oneself"? Surely not to abase oneself. It's something like acknowledging the limits of your human wisdom, power and goodness. Which is another way of saying, "to acknowledge God."

And what about “wicked ways”? Some focus on sexual morality. Others focus on social and political immorality. William Sloane Coffin was debating Jerry Falwell in a T.V. debate years ago. At one point Coffin said,

Jerry, the difference between us is that you think the basic problem in our nation is a lack of *chastity*. I think it is a lack of *charity*.

For the Hebrew prophets, as they reflected on verses like this one, the answer to the nation’s woes was *both* personal righteousness and social justice. Our verse is about change, the change that heals, not just for us as persons, but for the nation too! Think of the destruction of the earth by our greedy ways. Wicked ways include greedy ways!

## II

The Hebrew word for the “r” word is *SHUV*, which means “to turn”, to turn or return to God and God’s ways. The New Testament Greek word is “*metanoia*”, a turning of the mind. It means being given a new mind or, as Marcus Borg put it, “to go beyond the mind you have.” Some have said that one of the most unfortunate translations of a word in the Bible is the translation of “*metanoia*” as the “r” word. It is too narrow a word to describe all the changes we need to make, the changes that heal.

When has a change of mind been so significant for you that it changed your life? Sometimes the change comes when we have hit bottom, and we are given, as A.A. puts it, “the gift of desperation.”

Other times change comes as we are given the gift of *aspiration*. We see or experience beauty or truth or goodness, in such a powerful way that we want to orient our lives around such beauty or truth or goodness. It’s a change of devotions, affections.

### III

Mark, our first gospel, captures Jesus’ preaching this way:

Jesus came...preaching the gospel of God and saying: the time is fulfilled;  
the kingdom of God is at hand; turn and believe the good news!

Can you hear the thrilling, happy quality of this good news, the change the kingdom of God is bringing to us?

And this “good news” God is bringing must be more than good news for us alone, but for all, else it is not God’s good news.

When I think of the kingdom of God Jesus preached and embodied I think of *justice*. Where do you see justice happening? If it is a justice that heals, the kingdom of God has drawn near.

And I think of *joy*. Jesus said over and over again that the kingdom of God is joy. When we experience joy, the kingdom of God is at hand.

And I think of *peace*, peace among nations and religions, peace inside your own skin. When Paul talked about the gift of peace as the peace “that passes all understanding”, that peace is deeper than all we can think or imagine.

In Louise Erdrich’s recent novel *The Sentence*, the main character, a native American woman who works in a bookstore, is searching for the perfect sentence, the most beautiful sentence. She decides it is one she has heard in church: “Go in peace.” Then with the last words of the book she hears another: “The door is open. Go.”<sup>1</sup>

#### IV

So now we return to the word “change” and the healing it can bring. *The door is open. Go.*

In the gospels Jesus asks *everyone* to change, change in the way they most need to change. “Change and become as a child”, Jesus said, and the change includes what Buddhists describe as adopting a “beginner’s mind.”

There are a lot of people who will offer ideas about how we need to change. But these might not be the same as God’s voice, how God wants us to change, or

how we most need to change, which are really the same. We need to go deep within ourselves and listen to our own life to begin to discern this.

Through the years there have been people who've told me what God's will was for me, which often was how *they* wanted me to change! The change that God wants is for our healing and wholeness and thriving.

In our text from Matthew, we see a huge change, all at once. Jesus passes by Matthew at his tax office or tax booth, and says, "Follow me", and Matthew left his tax booth "rose and followed him."

Sometimes change can be that radical, in the literal meaning of the word: "to go to the root of things." Radical change happened to Zacchaeus, *chief* tax-collector in Jericho, who had become *very* rich by gouging people and was hated by Jerichoans.

When Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus' house for dinner, to the gasps of the crowd, Zacchaeus was changed by the divine friendship of Jesus.

At dinner he stood and said: "Half of all I have I will give to the poor and if I've defrauded anyone, I will restore to them four-fold." *Four-fold!* Jesus said, "Today, salvation has come to this house!" Salvation as a re-orienting of his life, from greed to compassion and to doing right by people. And Jesus stood and cheered.

## V

What about the change we most need? It may not be as dramatic as that of Matthew or Zacchaeus. It may be *change as growth*.

We can't plan our whole life out, but we can choose as A.A. phrases it, "to do the next right thing. It may begin very quietly. Philosopher Richard Rorty talks about what he calls "moral progress."

Moral progress is a matter of a wider and wider sympathy.

I think that was what Jesus was about in his life and teaching, a wider and wider sympathy, and a deeper and deeper compassion.

Sometimes change comes as a softening of the heart or a softening of the eyes.

In one of Mary Oliver's most beloved poems, "The Summer Day", she puts the change we need, the change that heals, in the form of a question:

Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one, wild and precious life?<sup>2</sup>

It's about turning, a new orientation. And a key quality about it is simplicity, a simplicity on the yonder side of complexity. It's about the one thing, not a

hundred, you want to orient your life around. Like beauty, or compassion or kindness or truth, or God and God's ways.

The Shakers discovered that simplicity of life, and you may know this beautiful hymn of theirs.

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free,

'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,

And when we find ourselves in the place just right,

'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.

When true simplicity is gain'd,

To bow and to bend, we will not be asham'd,

To turn, turn will be our delight,

'Til by turning, turning we come round right.!

Jesus said the change we need, the turning we need, will feel like that, like real honest to goodness good news.

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1. Louise Erdrich, *The Sentence* (N.Y.: HarperCollins, 2021), 355,374.

2. Mary Oliver, "*The Summer Day*", *Devotions* (N.Y.: Penguin Press,2017),316.



