

### Is Change Possible?

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on the third Sunday in Advent, December 14, 1997: Scripture Lessons: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

John the Baptist believed that we can change our harmful and destructive patterns of behavior. We can live changed lives. His preaching sounds harsh to our modern ears but he was an optimist about God's grace and human nature. He believed that sinful people like ourselves, can bear fruit worthy of repentance. Change is possible! That's why the message of John the Baptist is called *Good News*. His message is harsh and uncompromising but it's filled with the Good News that we're not condemned by our past. What sounds like a threat to us, sounded like a promise to the people of his day. No wonder people walked days to get to him.

John the Baptist is like a mother nagging her child, "Your report card is terrible! You can do better! I *know* you can better! You're capable of getting straight *As* if you really tried." Nagging usually doesn't do much good, but the mother really *believes* what she's saying and often she's right. The child is capable of doing much better. John the Baptist believed that *we're* capable of doing much better by the grace of God. He believed that men and women caught up in a web of self-destructive habits and socially harmful conduct could change their attitudes, could change their lifestyles, could change their priorities, and bring their lives more into conformity with God's will.

The crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" And he didn't hesitate to tell them. "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Tax collectors should not collect more than the amount prescribed. Soldiers must not extort money and be satisfied with their wages. John the Baptist calls us to change our attitudes about money and possessions. This is one of the most difficult changes of all. All of us have a legitimate concern about our security in the future. We need material goods. And we have a legitimate concern about providing for ourselves in our old age. We fear that recessions or sickness may wipe out our financial reserves. We fear having to accept the necessities of life from our children in our old age. These thoughts fill us with anxiety and insecurity and keep us

from being generous. We become so consumed by the desire for our security in the future that we become like Ebenezer Scrooge. But one of the marks of God's presence in us is generosity because God is generous. If the Spirit of God is working in us and through us we will change. We become generous. John the Baptist called God's people to change <sup>with respect to</sup> ~~towards~~ their use of money. "Be generous!" John the Baptist said. "You can become generous people. Change is possible."

John the Baptist preached the good news that people are able to change. By the grace of God we're able to change our behavior and our attitudes. John's call to repentance is meant to give us hope. And what most of us need to repent of most is our utter despair, our belief that things will never change for us, that *we* will never change, that no matter what we say or do we are stuck forever in the mess we've made of our lives or marriages, or the mess someone else has made <sup>of our lives.</sup> ~~them~~. What if the main thing we need to repent of is hopelessness, the idea that change is impossible?

----- The unsaved part of me believes that lie. The voice inside says, "You'll never change. <sup>No use trying.</sup> You'll always be the way you are. You'll never get better." And there's so much in my experience that supports that feeling. It's difficult to change our habits and attitudes. In the past month I've personally talked with many people who feel unable to change certain things about themselves that need to be changed. One person struggles with changing his eating habits. The doctor told him he's gotta lose weight - he's in danger of a stroke and diabetes that runs in his family. But he feels so frustrated living in a culture surrounded by tempting food especially during holidays. Another struggles with alcoholism and is at the point of despair. "How many times will it take for me to quit before I quit for good?" Another acknowledges that she has a nasty temper and a stinging tongue. She wants to change but feels powerless to change.

The cynical part of me finds it difficult to believe that people *can* change. For example, I remember a man in Portsmouth, Ohio - a member of my church, whose marriage broke up because he committed adultery. After his divorce he went from one troubled relationship with women to another seeking some kind of fulfillment. I lost contact with him for about a year.

Then I heard he got saved when he was in Florida. He was a changed man. He settled down. He was rebuilding his life. He had repented and returned to the church. My initial reaction was skepticism. It won't last. But I was wrong. It has lasted. He looks back on his life with regret but he's also a living testimony that change is possible.

Change *is* possible but it's *difficult*. Change is *so* difficult that we often want to give up and give in. Most of us probably want to be pure and Christlike *but without any effort on our part*. We want to be good Christians *if it doesn't inconvenience us. If it doesn't interfere too much with our lives. If it doesn't require too many sacrifices*. Sometimes we begin to believe the *lie* that it's better to accept the things that we *and God* don't like about ourselves rather than undergo the ordeal that change entails. We begin to believe that the way we *are* is all we ever can be - or all that God wants us to be. But change is often *slow* and requires *effort* and is usually accompanied by a lot of failure before we realize any measurable success. <sup>And</sup> ~~But~~ those who have, with God's grace, changed their attitudes, destructive lifestyles, and actions bear witness that it's worthwhile.

Christians are people who have committed ourselves to a life of repentance, which is to say *a life of change*. In our baptism and confirmation we've made a promise to God *and to the congregation* not to give up on ourselves, no matter how many times we have to repeat the process. We will keep telling ourselves the truth that, by God's grace, change is possible. And we'll keep turning around, every day if need be. We'll never say *never* (*I'll never recover, I'll never learn, I'll never change*). Why? Because we believe in God's goodness more than we believe in our own badness.

I read an article in the paper last week. Sam Turner is a 75 year old ex-convict. He was sentenced to five years in jail in 1947 on the charge of voluntary manslaughter. He was paroled after a year but soon was back in prison for burglary. He was a mean guy. In 1951, after spending about four years in jail he escaped a road side prison work crew. A 25 dollar reward was offered for his capture. That was 46 years ago. Last week he was captured. His name came up during a routine check of the state driver's license data-base. Court records showed that

Turner was an escaped convict. He was arrested while watching TV in his tiny home. After spending the night in jail he was released. The corrections commissioner has asked the Board of Pardons to grant Turner clemency because he was a changed man from what he was fifty years ago when he was 25.

After Turner had escaped the work crew and his final year of prison he married. He had several children. He became a church deacon. <sup>He learned a trade and</sup> He became a hardworking machinist. As time passed he became a loving and devoted grandfather. Friends, neighbors and even some family members said they had no idea that Turner had a criminal past. He became a model citizen, a respected church leader, a devoted family man, an honest and hard working employee. In one of his jobs he worked 14 years at a sewing plant. One of his employers said that Turner was "one of the finest employees that I've ever had." The corrections commissioner has asked the Board of Pardons and Parole to grant clemency. The commissioner said, "I told them that years have covered his past, that age and family have made him a different man." He's a changed man. He's not what he was 50 years ago.

Change is possible. By the grace of God you and I can change. I need your support as I attempt, by the grace of God, to change things in my life. I need you to accept me as I am before I have been changed in order that I might have hope that I can change. And you need the support of your brothers and sisters in Christ to attempt to change things in your life that God wants changed. <sup>The Lord Jesus Christ</sup> And the Christian church pledges to accept you, in success and failure, as together we seek to become all that God wants us to be.

Let us pray: Eternal God,  
you sent John the Baptist  
to prepare the way for the coming of your Son.  
Grant us the wisdom to see your purpose  
and openness to hear your will,  
that we too may prepare the way for Christ  
who is coming in power and glory  
to establish his kingdom of peace and justice;  
through Jesus Christ our Judge and our Redeemer,  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, forever. Amen.