

RECOVERING REPENTANCE

Isaiah 55:1-9; Psalm 63:1-8; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson

Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA

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

We were created to love God and in loving God our deepest hunger and thirst is satisfied. Whenever we turn away *from* God we turn from the source of love. Whenever we turn *to* God we turn to the One who *alone* is the fulfillment of our deepest longings. St. Augustine said it long ago, "You made us for yourself, and our heart is restless, until it finds its rest in you." C. S. Lewis wrote, "There have been times when I think we do not desire (God), but more often I find myself wondering whether, in our heart of hearts, we have ever wanted (Anyone) else." And our new study catechism states, "Our deepest, truest delights in this life are only a dim foreshadowing of the delights that await us in heaven." We all have a thirst, a hunger for God that nothing else can satisfy. In light of this, God confronts us with a profound question in our Old Testament lesson: "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?" And the Psalmist cries out, "O God, my soul thirsts for you." We were created to love God and in loving God our deepest hunger and thirst is satisfied.

My sermon is about repentance. Repentance means turning – turning from one object of desire to another *more* desirable object; turning from virtual reality to the One who is the source of all reality. Repentance doesn't necessarily mean turning from sin to something good. More often repentance means turning from something good to something better. We do it all the time in a grocery store when we pick up one item, examine it, and then turn to another which is a better buy and more nutritious. In a religious sense repentance means turning from good things that can't possibly fulfill our deepest needs and turning to God who is the source of all good things. Isaiah implores God's people to turn to God. "Don't waste your money on junk food in your spiritual cafeteria when you can eat the very best for free at the Lord's table." In our

Epistle lesson, Paul implores us, “Don’t follow the example of our Old Testament ancestors but turn to the Lord.” In our Gospel lesson, Jesus called his Galilean friends to repent – “Unless you repent, you will perish.” Repentance is not something we do once and for all or once a year during Lent. Repentance, turning to God, is part of our every day Christian journey.

I’ve been reading a poem about repentance by the Italian poet Dante. He wrote *The Divine Comedy* around A.D.1318. He named it a comedy because it has a happy ending. In those days books with sad endings were called *tragedies* and those with happy endings, *comedies*. *The Divine Comedy* takes us on a journey through the afterlife where we see the sorrow of the unrepentant and the joy of those who have repented. Dante begins by telling us about his mid-life crisis that forced him to take his journey. When he was 35 years old, he woke up and found himself lost in the woods. He didn’t know where he was. No paths. He didn’t know which way to go. He remembered straying from the road he was on and ending up getting lost. He asks himself, “How did I let myself get here?” He was lost, didn’t know which way to turn. But God was good to Dante. God’s grace found Dante lost in the woods and gave him a guide to show him the way to his eternal home where he would be embraced by “the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.” But before he arrives at his final destination he goes through all hell.

Dante was a good Catholic and believed that the afterlife is divided into three parts. The lowest part is *Hell*, for unrepentant sinners. Hell is the self-chosen destiny of those who defiantly refuse to let God love them. They go to the most extreme lengths to avoid God’s loving embrace. The second part of the afterlife is Purgatory, for repentant sinners. Everybody in purgatory ends up eventually in heaven. The third part of the afterlife is Paradise, for sinners who have, by God’s grace, over a long period of time, through great effort, disciplined their

uncontrolled appetites, turning from cheap, junk food that has no nutritional value to the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation. In short, Dante goes through hell before he discovers the source of all goodness, pleasure and joy in God.

As I was reading Dante's *Inferno*, I remembered a conversation I once had with a man who, like Dante, woke up in mid-life and found himself lost in the woods. Lost, frightened and depressed, he was so desperate that he tried to take his own life. Today, I'm glad to say, he's on his way to recovery and has resumed his journey to the light. But he said, "Please tell people not to do what I tried to do. Don't ever try to take your life. I've been through all hell." But now he's on the way to life. Many of us will wake up some day to discover that we've lost our way. Our life has not turned out the way we wanted. Our goals *are not* and *will not* be achieved. Our dreams turn into nightmares. We discover that ~~what~~ we've spent our labor for that which does not satisfy. We lose our way and don't know where to turn. Christians so easily lose our way. We've been baptized. We eat and drink the spiritual food and drink of Holy Communion but we *still* lose our way. We wake up lost in the woods and say "How did I get myself in this mess? Where do I go from here? Where do I turn?" We find ourselves going through hell because we took the wrong path, we got off the straight and narrow, we made bad choices. We wonder if we'll every find our way out of the woods.

But God is good. God comes to us into the woods, not just once, but over and over, in the person of Jesus Christ. Into the woods our Master goes. He finds us again and again. He shows us the way back to God, the source of all pleasure. He calls us to follow him. "Repent! Turn to God, the source of love and life! You're destined not to be lost, but to be found. You're destined not for failure but success. Don't give up! Repent! Turn to me and you'll discover that one day

life will win over death,

good will win over evil,

love will win over hatred,

joy will win over sadness,

and you, as well as the whole world, will work the way your Creator intended it to work.”

Repentance refers to the human effort that we put into becoming who God has destined us to be. God has unconditionally chosen us for salvation, not hell. Repentance tells us about our freely chosen response to God’s unconditional and amazing grace that destines us for eternal joy. God’s grace not only freely and unconditionally accepts us but also works in us, helping us through the many dangers, toils, and snares of our lives.

Now – a final word. When Christ calls us to repent it may help us respond if we imagine ourselves (and the world) as God has destined us to become. When we try to imagine ourselves (and the world) in that way, we should see in our present moments of happiness our potential for a joy that never ends; see in our restless longing to share ourselves with another person our potential for intimate friendship with God; see in joyful family gatherings the joy of a world reconciled to God. When we laugh at a really good joke we get a snapshot of the delight God has destined for us. When we tap our feet to the sound of our favorite music and it sends shivers down our spine, we see an image of our capacity for beauty as God has destined us to enjoy. Our happiest memories are images of the happiness God has destined for us. Watch a giggling two year old in the arms of his mother or father and you get a fairly good picture of what God has destined for all of us who truly repent and turn to Christ in joyful faith.

Let us pray: Merciful God, you gave your Son to suffer the shame of the cross. Save us from hardness of heart, that, seeing him who died for us, we may repent, confess our sin, and receive your overflowing love, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.