

3. Doctors (1) Sympathy (2) Judgment (3) Transformation

REPENT AND BE BAPTIZED

Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19; 1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35

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April 14, 2002

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

Fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus the apostle Peter preached a powerful sermon. Peter tells the crowd that they had rejected and murdered the Messiah. Many were cut to the heart. They realized their terrible mistake and cried out, "What shall we do?" Peter said, "Repent and be baptized." I want to speak to you this morning about repentance. Barbara Brown Taylor, one of top preachers in the United States, wrote a book about repentance a couple of years ago. What I say is based on what she wrote.

Several years ago Taylor became increasingly dissatisfied with her tardiness. She was chronically late for appointments. She didn't like that about herself. She wanted to change. She wanted to be a person of her word. "If I say I'm going to be there at one I want to be there." She also wanted to do something about her compulsion to try to cram too many things into too little time. In short, she wanted to repent. Repentance means change. The Greek word for repentance, μετανοια, literally means "a change of mind". When we change our way of thinking, lifestyle changes become a little less difficult.

Taylor habitual lack of punctuality received one of two reactions. One reaction was sympathy. People would say, "Oh, I'm late all the time too. Isn't it awful?" Or, "Barbara, that's just the way you are. You can't change the way you are." Sympathy made her feel good. It also made her feel that it's all right to be late. Another reaction to her tardiness was judgment. "Why can't you ever be on time?" They'd get angry and want to punish her. "If you can't show up on time, just forget about our friendship." So -- she'd get sympathy and acceptance from some or judgment and rejection from others. But what she didn't usually get was someone who took her desire to change seriously and offer to help.

But one woman did. Her friend said, "I hear you want to be more punctual. Great! I'll help you. Let's get together once a week to see how you're doing." Her friend refused to sympathize with Taylor but she also refused to judge her. Taylor claims it was easier to receive sympathy or judgment than to let another support her in the hard work of transformation. Together Barbara and her friend came up with several specific actions to help her become more punctual. She set all her clocks five minutes ahead. She gave herself more time to get to appointments even if it meant arriving early and "wasting time". Finally, she agreed to call her friend every Sunday to report on her progress. The last step was the most difficult. There was a huge difference between saying to herself, 'I want to be on time' and saying to someone else, 'I'll call you on Sunday to tell you how often I was on time this past week.'

Barbara Brown Taylor's experience happens all too often in the church. Lots of people will accept us with our faults and sins and sympathize with us. Lots of people will judge and reject us. But few offer to support us in the hard work of personal transformation.

Some churches have lots of sympathy for sinners. We operate like hospices, where sin-sick patients receive sympathetic care but no one really expects anyone to get better. The greedy remain greedy. The angry stay angry. We just accept people the way they are. These churches subscribe to a kind of no-fault theology in which no one is responsible. All the church can do is sit by hold hands and sympathize with the sin-sick individual.

On the other hand, some churches operate like law courts where sins are named, harsh punishments assessed, and rejection encouraged. Ministers in this sort of church blamed the September 11 terrorist attacks on feminists, homosexuals, abortion rights advocates and liberals. Pregnant, unmarried teenagers are required to stand before the congregation to be publicly rebuked. An extensive, but selective, list of sins becomes the basis for acceptance or rejection. I'll leave it to your imagination to figure out what sins are at the top of the list. Sin is judged and the sinner is rejected.

Neither one of those two kinds of churches really encourages repentance. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, the church as a hospice doesn't encourage repentance because it doesn't expect people to change. The church as a law court doesn't encourage repentance because repentance isn't interested in singling out scapegoats and punishing them. The goal of repentance is transformation, transformation of individuals and of society. What we need is a third kind of church: not a hospice where nobody is expected to change; not a law-court where sin is judged, punished and the sinner excluded. But the church as a gymnasium where people come committed to the work of personal and social transformation. That kind of church – a church as a gymnasium would encourage repentance.

Traditionally repentance has four steps: confession, pardon, penance, and life in a community of faith. First, confession. Christians throughout the ages have found that personal transformation is facilitated if they confess their sin either publicly or to one other person. The success of Weight Watchers is based on this principle. People become dissatisfied with their weight. They don't want sympathy and they don't want judgment and rejection. They want transformation. By going to Weight Watchers we're confessing we have a problem and want to deal with it. When we go to a psychologist it's a confession that we need help to change.

After confession, comes pardon. Pardon comes before any change. Pardon isn't something we earn or work for to achieve. Forgiveness is a gift. Forgiveness is not conditioned on change. Forgiveness, rather, gives us hope to begin the hard work of transformation.

After confession and forgiveness comes "penance". Penance has all but disappeared from Protestant vocabularies, but it's a good word. Once we've confessed our sins and received assurance of pardon, we voluntarily take on specific acts which are baby steps in the direction of new life. If we've slandered someone, we might revisit all the people where we've slandered that person and set the record straight. In Weight Watchers, for example, following the point system is really an act of penance. I have a friend whose besetting sin is avarice. He has an

inordinate desire to buy things. He doesn't like this part of himself. He now won't buy anything until he gives away something of equal value. He recently gave away a Bose radio. He is increasing his giving and cutting down on his consumption and he likes himself a lot better than he used to. Penance is not punishment. Penance is exercise and repair.

Repentance isn't complete until we're involved in a community of faith. In the book of Acts we read that 3000 people were added to the church following repentance and baptism. I want our church to be a community of transformation. I don't want us to be a hospice that merely gives comfort and palliative care to sin sick people on our way to death. I certainly don't want our church to become a law court where sins are judged and people rejected because they don't live up to our standards. Rather, I like to think of our church as a health club where people come as they are, whoever they are, whatever they are. We come, not primarily to feel either good or bad about ourselves but to be challenged and encouraged to attempt the changes we desire in ourselves and in the world. We're here to get some serious physical, emotional, and spiritual exercise. We're here to support of one another on our way to life and health.