

A Sermon Commending Repentance

Colleagues,

“Summertime. And the livin’ is easy.” So goes one of the American classics in George Gershwin’s opera PORGY AND BESS. Well, it really was not “easy” at all in the hardscrabble life of Porgy and Bess alongside Old Man River—even though “the fish were jumpin’ and the cotton was high.” But for this pensioned retiree, white not black, umpteen times more wealthy than Porgy and Bess, living a couple hundred miles upstream from them on the same Mississippi river, there is no comparison from their life to the “ease” of mine. But that’s not where I intended to go when I started this paragraph with “Summertime.” I merely wanted to admit that I am taking the “easy” way for this week’s summer ThTh posting. To wit, it’s last Sunday’s sermon at Christ Lutheran Church in suburban St. Louis, where I was the guest preacher. For goldie-oldies it is sometimes an achievement to get just one thing done each week.

Peace & Joy!

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Text Mark 6:1-13. Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

1 He left that place and came to his home town, and his disciples followed him. 2 On the sabbath he began to teach in

the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, 'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! 3 Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offense [Greek verb says:"were SCANDALIZED"] at him. 4 Then Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honor, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house.' 5 And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. 6 And he was amazed at their UNBELIEF.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. 7 He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them AUTHORITY over the unclean spirits. 8 He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; 9 but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. 10 He said to them, 'Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. 11 If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.' 12 So they went out and proclaimed that all should REPENT. 13 They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and HEALED them.

Strange text.

First paragraph. Jesus FAILS as evangelist right in his own home town. "He could not do deeds of power there . . . because of their unbelief."

Next paragraph he sends out his disciples to do the same job—and they SUCCEED.

[And in Mark's gospels the disciples are not exactly super-stars. Most often just klutzes. Yet here Jesus gives them their specs—cum “‘authority”—and they pull it off—“cast out many demons, anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.”
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What gives? How does that compute?

Here's one possibility: Could be that when you are “scandalized” [the actual Greek term in the text] by Jesus, as his hometown folks and family were—“He's just one of us townies. We know all his relatives. He's nobody special. Although what he does/says is nothing we've ever seen/heard before”—that amounts to the tripwire. When you're turned off by Jesus, that amounts to what he himself labels “unfaith,” a vote of no confidence. And when you don't trust Jesus, he's helpless to help you. Thereafter he himself is “amazed,” shakes his own head in disbelief, that you don't want his help.

What's so SCANDALOUS about the help Jesus offers? Jesus says there is a precedent for his scandalous reception. It's been the standard scenario when God sends a prophet. Specifically when God takes one of the home town kids and sends them right back to the town square, and they start out: “Hey, folks, God's got a message for you. I'm authorized—worse than that, under orders—to tell you such and so. And the main message is ‘You have Got to Turn Around!’” The Biblical word for that is REPENT.

But there's confusion these days about what that word REPENT means. “Feel sorry,” most folks think. NOT SO. Both in the OT and the NT—Hebrew and Greek languages—the word has nothing to do with feelings.

It's a TRAFFIC DIRECTION verb.

“TURN AROUND. YOU'RE GOING THE WRONG WAY.”

Repent is addressed as much to your feet as it is to your head or heart.

UNREPENTANCE IS following this traffic sign: [Held up a standard NO U TURN road sign that Marie had created: Big RED circle. Black inverted "J" arrow in the middle. RED slash diagonal across the arrow. No actual words, just the image.]

REPENTANCE IS following this other sign. [Held up Marie's equally big sign with GREEN circle and large black letters inside YES U TURN]

The folks in Jesus' home town stuck to THIS (RED) traffic sign, so salvation didn't happen. Where the disciples went, they held up THIS (GREEN) traffic sign. Folks followed it, and good things happened.

But apparently even for the disciples, it wasn't a piece of cake. In giving them their orders, Jesus signals that there may be towns where they'll get the same reception as he did in his hometown.—"will not welcome you, refuse to hear you...." Towns, cities, even countries!? Even our country, the USA?

At first it may sound strange to hear that the gist of the disciples' preaching was so simple:

"That all should repent." PUNKT.

Nothing more is mentioned about sermon content.

Could be that Mark is already using shorthand. In his opening chapter, he has a one-liner with four segments to it. It comes from Jesus' own mouth, a summary of all that Mark intends to tell us: JESUS CAME TO GALILEE PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL OF GOD AND SAYING: "God's Time has come. God's Kingdom is Here. Repent. Trust the Good News."

So when you hold up the “YES U TURN” sign, folks will naturally ask: FROM WHAT, TO WHAT?

TO the Good News, AWAY FROM any and all alternative road signs with their proposed “good newses.”

Repentance and the USA

In two days and two months it will be 9/11/2006. Five years since that day that jolted us all. But it didn't jolt us enough to follow THIS (GREEN) sign. And President Bush's press conference in Chicago on Friday continued holding up the other sign: STAY THE COURSE! NO U TURN.

How can nations repent? you ask. Are there any examples?

There was one during the Civil War.

Abraham Lincoln, the first ever Republican [!] president, called for a national day of repentance in the middle of the Civil War. It was clear that God was raining down judgment on both sides. Congress agreed. Passed legislation. It happened!

There's one in the Bible—the book of Jonah.

The REAL miracle in the book of Jonah is not the prophet inside the big fish, but the Assyrian world-empire repenting when Jonah came and held up the GREEN sign. Everybody from Emperor to street-sweeper donned sackcloth and ashes, and God's doom didn't happen.

America is the only world-empire around these days. Things are imploding, but it's NO U TURN. Draw your own conclusions.

We may get sidetracked when we talk of nations repenting. Asking “Repent of what? What sin, what wrong, did we do that we

should stop doing?" Check that out in the N.T. and you get a surprise. Never are people told to repent OF SOMETHING. It's just flat-out REPENT. Flat-out YOU'RE GOING THE WRONG WAY. TURN AROUND. FAST. It's like the Interstate: Someone going east-bound in the west-bound lane. If you don't make a U-turn and go the other way, you're gonna get killed.

Ditto for REPENTANCE. Check Luke 13. Catastrophes, 2 of them, had just happened. Tower of Siloam fell over and killed 18 people. Pilate carried out a blood-bath, massacring Galileans while they were at worship. Folks ask Jesus: How do you explain this? In both cases Jesus (in effect) says "simple." His actual words: "I tell you unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." When God's judgment machine is coming down the highway and you are heading into it, "staying the course," you're gonna be roadkill.

Christ is the other lane in God's interstate, God's other way of trafficking with sinners. REPENT means get off the deadly highway and "U-turn" over to the other one. That's where the demons get cast out, the demons that tempt us to take the wrong highway and refuse to U-turn. "Yes, U turn" is where sick folks get healed.

We probably won't get our nation to repent here this a.m. Seems that lots of folks, our president included, don't think REPENT applies to us. To the terrorists, for sure, but not to us. But we Christians know that, as Bob Bertram coined the phrase, that is the "Pharisee heresy." Pharisees believe: "The sinners need to repent, we good guys do not."

Not so, says Jesus throughout the 4 Gospels. He calls ALL to repent. The flatout sinners to U-turn from their lawless lives and turn to him. The law-keepers to U-turn from their self-righteous lives and turn to him.

But of course, some people, possibly some nations too, ARE more righteous, less all-out wicked, than others. What about that? Jesus never disputes that when dealing with individual cases.

The question is: when you DO have real righteousness, what do you do with it? If you hang your heart on it, you're lost. In more than one parable Jesus shows that the self-righteous folks are "lost-er" than the sinners.

Flatout sinners have ONLY to leave their unrighteousness behind when they TURN to Jesus.

The Do-Gooder guys/gals have to leave their righteousness, their good stuff, behind when they TURN to Jesus.

We good gals/guys here in church this a.m. know what a sacrifice THAT calls for.

But that's still what REPENT means for us good folks. So let's work on REPENT just among ourselves here at Christ-Lutheran. It could have benefits for our entire nation. God has been known to work with small numbers to achieve great things, with the remnant of a few faithful in ancient Israel to save the masses.

So let's check it out.

BAD NEWS

Step 1.

What road signs are we actually following, we folks here this a.m.? Our culture bombards us with other "road signs" every day. Many of them have the \$-sign on them. You know them.

RICHER IS BETTER.

CONSUME MORE.

HAVE FUN.

YOU DESERVE THIS GOODIE.

OR THE OLD SCHLITZ BEER COMMERCIAL: "YOU ONLY GO AROUND ONCE IN THIS LIFE, SO GRAB FOR ALL THE GUSTO YOU CAN." And a hand

reaches out for a can of Schlitz. That's a Road Sign for how to "GO" in this life, especially if you know that we only GO around once.

Jesus once illustrated the alternative with hand-motions. Living this way (hands extended pulling everything in to yourself), he said, is a guaranteed way to lose your life. The RED sign.

Living this way (hands giving your life away) "for my sake and the Gospel" [the GREEN sign], he said, is the way you "save" it.

I'm just as hooked by these other road signs, as I imagine you here today also are. They're not only outside me, but they're inside too. Most likely inside you also. It's a sign of our need for help. The help called REPENT.

But in this text the diagnosis is even worse than that.

Step 2.

Mark goes deeper: folks were "scandalized" at Jesus. Jesus' own deeper diagnosis is the hard word "Unbelief." That makes it personal. Not just ideas or concepts. But a Jesus-response. "You don't trust me. Your hearts are hanging on something else than my Good News." Jesus' own goal with us is frustrated. That means we don't get healed either. Just like those people in Nazareth, none of his "mighty deeds" happen to us. If we were once healed, we've moved back into the sick ward.

Step 3.

Deepest diagnosis of all. Stuck following the wrong road sign is being stuck in the sick ward, condemned to stay there. Even worse, CHOOSING the sick ward over the Healer. Leads to a Dead End. The demons, the unclean spirits win. These demons are not

spooks or strange ghosts; they are the OTHER ROAD SIGNS that are all around us. And they DO have power. They do pull us. To follow the old signs—whatever they are—and make no U-turn, is not a “way of life,” but the way of death. Jesus said so: “I tell you unless you repent—switch road signs—you will all likewise perish.” So switching road signs is the way to go. But we need help. Big help.

Good News.

Step 4.

You’ve heard it umpteen times before—right here in Christ Lutheran worship. Jesus is that Big Help. Offering us that Sweet-swap. “I’ll take to myself your dead-end and give you life instead. I’ll take the rap, you get the reprieve. I’ll take your cursed stuff, you get my blessings. God’s blessings!” Jesus keeps coming back to both types of non-repenters—those who could care less about worship this morning AND us clearly “more righteous,” do-gooder gals and guys here in church. To both types he says “Trade yah! My righteousness for your accumulated unrighteousness, as well as my BETTER righteousness for your accumulated righteous achievements.”

Step 5.

“Repent” is the one and only word we hear in this text that the disciples preached. We want to follow it right now. The GREEN sign. The very telling of the Jesus-story gives the energy to prompt us to switch road signs. Deserting the red sign, following the green one. Repent [turning away from other stuff] and Believe [turning to] the Good News.

Step 6.

We go back out into the world living by the GREEN sign,

hustling the GREEN sign, commending it to others. "Calling others to repentance is not murky, gloomy stuff." Instead it's saying to friends: "Been there, done that, and it's a dead end. Turned away from that to Christ and his road signs. Schlitz sign is NOT where the gusto is. The Christ sign is. And talk about gusto! With Christ you get the Holy Gusto. That's a gust of Life from God, the gusto God himself runs on. And with that Gusto you don't just Go Around Once. On the back of the YES, U TURN road signs it says: "Guaranteed to last from here to eternity."

Christ offers us samples of his Holy Gusto—to eat and to drink—here on the altar in just a few minutes. It's all under the green sign where RED-sign demons (yours and mine) get cast out, where sick folk (you and I) get healed. God's own GREEN revolution! Y'all come.

[Somewhere along the way I did tuck in (ad lib) the story about Luther's 1529 essay "Concerning War with the Turks," the name for Muslims in his day] Suleiman the magnificent had 600,000 Muslim troops outside the gates of Vienna, the eastern outpost of the Holy Roman Empire. He'd already ravaged much of SE Europe. Luther wrote an essay offering his fellow Christians "unwanted" advice. He said:

There are two enemies outside the gates of Vienna. Suleiman and God. And God is using Suleiman, surely a wicked man, as the "rod of my anger." That's the language God used (in Isaiah) when he sent the king of Assyria to take Israel into slavery. So two different strategies are needed for two very different enemies, though both are allies right now. With God as your enemy, only one thing will work: REPENT. Anything else and you're dead in your tracks. God is a patsy with repentant folks. He befriends them. He stops being their

enemy If we No-U-turn European Christians repented , we would rob Suleiman of his SUPER ally. And then we might be able beat him if it's "only" a military conflict. But how to get the Holy Roman Empire to repent? Why not at least a few of us do it, who believe in the power of repentance? God's been known to listen to a small "remnant" of faithful folks and save even their unfaithful countrymen, just "for the sake of the righteous remnant."

So far Luther's essay. There were no polls in those days to find out if anybody repented. Let's suppose Luther and wife Katie and the kids did "repent" for Europe at supper that night around the table. Maybe a few other folks who read his treatise. We don't know if they did, but what we do know is that the completely unexpected happened. Suleiman turned around at Vienna, didn't sack the city, and went back home to Istanbul.