

Matthew 21:23-32 Bill Uetrict 18 Pentecost 9.28.23

Author Kathleen Norris in her book **Amazing Grace** tells of a time when she was an artist-in-residence at a parochial school and was teaching kids about lament psalms, those poems in which people lay it on the line often with God about their anger, sadness, and disappointments. Often to help the kids grasp the content about lament psalms, Kathleen had them write their own laments.

One little boy she was working with wrote a poem called “The *Monster Who Was Sorry*.” This little boy began the poem by admitting that he hates it when his father yells at him. His response in the poem is to throw his sister down the stairs, and then to wreck his room, and finally to wreck the whole town. The poem then concluded: “Then I sit in my messy house and say to myself, ‘I shouldn’t have done all that.’”

This is not a bad start for repentance. The realization that the little boy is sitting in a messy house is a great place to begin. Look at the mess I have created. Now frankly, adults often don’t get there. They may be sitting in a messy house, but they can conveniently not see it. The little boy sees it, and then says, “That was a stupid thing to do.” And it was.

That’s a good start on repentance. But an author like Matthew wants to say, “there’s more.” Regret and sorry are good places to begin. The son in today’s gospel lesson who initially says “no” to working in the vineyard is said to have *changed his mind*. The verb there in the Greek language is a form of the words *to repent*. Those particular words probably include an emphasis on the sorry part of the act of repentance. The son out of *regret* changes his mind and then acts differently. He ends up going to work in the vineyard even though he had told his father that he wasn’t going to do so.

Sorry and regret are good places to start but biblically that is seldom enough. True repentance is not just inner contrition. It is also

transformed behavior, a new direction in life. Kathleen Norris says of the little boy who labeled himself a monster and who was feeling sorry about the mess he created, “If that boy had been a novice in the fourth-century monastic desert, his elders might have told him that, yes, he was on the way to repentance, not such a monster after all, but only human. And if the house is messy, [these elders might have said], he ought to clean it up, he ought to make it into a place where God might wish to dwell.”

Regret and feeling sorry are good things. But cleaning up the house is a really good thing. What you say is important. But often what you end up doing is probably more important. The first son said that he wasn’t going to work in the vineyard, but he ended up working, nonetheless. The second son said he was going to work but didn’t. Jesus commends the former. Often, actions speak louder than words.

Elsewhere in Matthew, Jesus claims, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.” The tax collectors and the prostitutes are doing the will of the Father by trusting in John, and yes, by following Jesus. Jesus experiences them in the first son. They may not have started out so well. But now it’s different. They changed their minds, and that is what Jesus is after.

In the second son, Jesus sees the chief priests and elders. They talk a good game. They come out of the starting blocks looking good. But they don’t know how to turn around. They don’t know how to respond to something new. They don’t change their minds. Be like the prostitutes and tax collectors, Jesus is saying. Change your mind! Repent! Go in a new direction.

That really is the invitation of Ezekiel today. Addressing a group of exiles who are used to blaming their parents and grandparents for the mess they find themselves in, Ezekiel asks: “What do you mean by

repeating the proverb concerning the land of Israel, ‘The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are on edge’? I love how Eugene Peterson puts these words in his **Message** Bible: “What do you people mean by going around the country repeating the saying, ‘The parents ate green apples; the children got a stomachache?’”

The exiles are dealing with their current situation by finding somebody to blame. Instead of taking responsibility for what has occurred to them, they are conveniently finding a scapegoat in the previous generations. And it’s leading them to a sense of resignation. I guess there is nothing we can do. We’re just paying the price for the sins of the previous generation. We’re just stuck where we are.

Now admittedly, the scriptures elsewhere speak of the sins of the fathers being visited upon the generations to come. I think it’s worth our while to pay attention to what has been passed on to us by previous generations. And sometimes what has been passed on hasn’t been good. Those of us who have looked at the patterns of behavior in the generations that have preceded us will probably admit that some of us have inherited some rotten stuff. And there is no reason to overlook that.

But Ezekiel is telling us that we would do well to stop simply looking back and start looking around. We cause plenty of our own problems. And what’s more, there is a way out of them. It’s time to stop the excuses. Yes, your parents weren’t always good to you. Yes, the generation that came before you made some big mistakes. Yes, other countries cause problems for us. But we cause enough of our own. And we aren’t going to get anyplace simply by blaming everybody else.

What God is after is life, Ezekiel is saying. “Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. I want a better life for people. And the good life is not going to come from blaming other people. It’s not going to come from the

kind of resignation that suggests that nothing will ever change. The real good life will come from repentance, from accepting responsibility, from changing your mind, from moving into a new direction, from realizing that you are living in a mess and that you really need to clean it up.”

Lots of folks think that the goal in life is not to have something to repent of. We get it all right, and we won’t have to repent. Well, good luck! What an illusion! We all get so much wrong! And in some ways, that may not be so bad.

Suzanne Stabile says that we don’t know ourselves by what we get right; we know ourselves by what we get wrong. I find that insight fascinating. It was validated for me last weekend when inside of myself I was getting a lot of stuff wrong. I was getting irritated by this. And I was being bothered by that. And the focus was on other people. But when I took a moment of hesitation and looked inside of me, I realized that the problem wasn’t *them*. The problem was me. The problem was the stuff that I take too seriously, the things that are my righteous obsessions. The problem was my fear about the future for me personally. I only figured that out because I got it wrong. And getting it wrong, if I can be vulnerable enough to admit the wrong, is what can take me to repentance, which really is not bad news, but good news! It is life giving.

Repentance leads to health and wholeness. It leads to a better life, making it clear that there is always a way out. What has been doesn’t always have to be what will be. The past doesn’t have to determine the future.

Unfortunately, many of us think that repentance is an awful burden, that it is an exercise in constant incrimination. Oh, I’m no good. I’m a monster. I’m always getting it wrong. You do get it wrong sometimes. And the bigger problem is not getting it wrong but not admitting it. When you repent, you are well on your way to what Ezekiel

says is a new heart and a new spirit. When you repent, you are well on your way to making life better, living, as Ezekiel would say, rather than dying.

Here's the bottom line. You *can* repent. You *can* take responsibility and stop blaming everybody else because life is grounded in a God who is gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. The writer of the Psalm appointed for today says to God, "Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love, for they have been of old." God's forgiveness and God's mercy are God's tradition. They'll be around when you choose to repent. In fact, they are what enable you to repent. If you know that forgiveness and mercy are God's tradition, why would you live life blaming everybody else? Why would you not take responsibility for the messes you have helped to create?

Bill, Shar, Paula, Gary, Steve, Generation X, Millennial Generation, you Baby Boomers, you who are white, you who are black, you who are the church, you who are the United States, repent. And then, go clean up your room.