

An Ash Wednesday Meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, February 6, 2008, dedicated to Grace Glaros and her parents' Chris and Lauren and always to the glory of God!

“Why Repent? . . . I’m UCC?”

Isaiah 58: 1-12, Matthew 6:16-21

Part I of VIII in the Lenten Sermon Series:

“Questions My Father Asked Me”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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John and Marguerite Builder were colorful members of my first church in Cleveland. They were always dressed immaculately and always in church. They were expressive and shared freely their feelings and insights about my ministry - no holds barred. One thing John expressed with great regularity was his absolute dislike of the Prayer of Confession in each Sunday service. He would come through the greeting line and tell me how much he hated it. At first, I braced myself for the weekly exchange about our prayer of confession. I grew to enjoy it.

One time he said, *“The prayers YOU print in this bulletin are irrelevant. I don’t sin the way you say I do.”* Another time he said, *“No matter what you print, I will not read these prayers. I don’t feel bad about myself and I refuse to pray prayers that make me feel bad.”*

I told John the prayers were “corporate” prayers, not personal prayers. They reflected the community’s response to sin and brokenness and not John’s personal sins, necessarily. I told John, in the words of A.A., to “take what he liked and leave the rest.” I told

him to use the silence after the prayer to lift up to God his own sins and speak to God about those relationships he had injured, severed or damaged with his attitude and words. He didn't like that. No matter what I said, John didn't like it. He hated confessing sins and he would not do it.

One Sunday, I was ready for John. I challenged him to read Matthew 3:9-10. This is the text in which **John** the Baptist calls people to repentance and demands proof of authentic conversion. I told John to read it and meditate on it every day for one week and return to worship next Sunday to discuss it with me. I said, "*If repentance was good enough for your namesake, it should be good enough for you.*" He accepted the challenge.

One week later he returned with this reflection, "*I still hate the prayer of confession, but I will use the silence to speak to God about **my stuff.***" I smiled, embraced him and told him, the angels of heaven were rejoicing, Jesus was celebrating that one who lost was found again! The prodigal had returned home! He cracked a smile and Marguerite howled with laughter! Our conversations about confession became muted as each of us prayed to God to one another's sins and most certainly to humble our hearts.

Like some of you, John saw no reason for public or regular confession sin. While some believe it has no place in the liturgy, you should know that both Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin, our Swiss Protestant Reformed forebearers, felt strongly that confession belonged in the liturgy. The Pilgrim Hymnal and all other hymnals and worship books since in the United Church of Christ, recommend weekly prayers of confession of sin. Only recently have we begun to move away from such a practice.

The prayer of confession is a public call (a corporate statement) of the need to acknowledge, name and change what the prophets of old (John the Baptist, Jesus, and all the apostles and the historic church) have named as our sinfulness and brokenness. Through

confession we are called to repentance, to an assurance of forgiveness and ultimately to salvation in Christ. That's not only UCC, what is more important, it is Christian. Sometimes, we need to remember our definition characteristic is not our polity but our Savior. It is not in the way we do church, but who we follow into church that matters.

Isaiah joins Hosea and Amos in saying that our worship, our liturgy, music and praise are meaningless to God if we do not fast, lament of our sins and do social justice for our sisters and brothers. This morning, BREAD gathered at the State House for prayer, action and testimony on behalf of those crippled by pay day lenders - some who are members and friends of this congregation. Such action for justice would be worthy in the eyes of the prophets and our Savior. This is corporate action to address a corporate sin. Today, as I preach from the Gladden pulpit, we know that such repentance was preached from this pulpit in the past.

In his book, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Bishop Desmond Tutu writes of his experience in pioneering the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa in the aftermath of Apartheid. As the country moved forward from despotism to democracy, this commission exposed the atrocities committed in the past, and worked to achieve forgiveness for the oppressors of apartheid South Africa and reconciliation in an attempt to heal the nation and move forward to a bright new future. Bishop Tutu, speaking to the deep need for remorse, repentance and reconciliation writes:

Our God is one who has a particular soft spot for sinners. The Good Shepherd in the parable Jesus told had been quite ready to leave 99% perfectly well-behaved sheep in the wilderness to look for, an unattractive, fluffy little lamb - fluffy little lambs do not usually stray from their mummies - but for the troublesome, obstreperous old ram. This was the one on which the Good Shepherd expended all his energy. When he found it, it is highly unlikely to have had a beautiful fleece. It would almost certainly

*have been thoroughly bedraggled and perhaps fallen into a ditch of dirty water and thus was smelling to high heaven . . . Having found it, the Good Shepherd did not pinch his nostrils in disgust. No, he took it, placed it gently on his shoulders and home to throw a party because he had found the lost one. And Jesus says there is **greater joy** in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 needing no repentance. (Page 84).*

Our God has a bias for sinners. How true! Our God in Jesus Christ, could regularly be found with the lost, the last and the least. The prim and proper ones, the orthodox religious leaders, and the company of those who “got it all right,” were not the ones with whom Jesus pitched his tent! He would never have consigned to hell anyone whom others might consider irredeemable. Irredeemable and unforgivable was not a word in the vocabulary of Jesus. This is good news! This leaves the door open for me and you to repent and turn to God in Jesus Christ. And on your way to the altar, leave your judgments of others behind. Work out your own salvation, the Gospel of Luke says. Get it right - NOW - with those whom you have lorded judgment over and bias against.

“Why repent,” you ask? For one thing, repentance is (literally) good for the soul. But, we would be wise, on our way to repentance to remember the root of the word, not its reinterpreted outcome. Marcus Borg in *The Heart of Christianity* writes:

*The biblical meaning of ‘repent’ is not primarily contrition, but **resolve**. In the Hebrew Bible to repent meant primarily to return to God. Its metaphorical home is the exile. To repent means to return from exile, to reconnect with God, to walk the way of the wilderness that leads from Babylon to God.*

In the New Testament, repentance continues to have the meaning it had in the Hebrew Bible . . . And repentance in the New Testament has an additional nuance of meaning. The Greek roots of the word combine to mean ‘go beyond the mind you have.’ Go beyond the mind

you have been given and acquired. Go beyond the mind shaped by our culture to the mind that you have ‘in Christ.’” (p. 180)

Repentance is the pathway to salvation. Through repentance we set ourselves on the path of reconnection, reconciliation and personal and social transformation. By dying and rising to Christ in repentance, we open ourselves to be in the mind and spirit of Christ.

To repent means to go beyond the mind you have. It means to stretch beyond your own ability to answer all the questions of faith and cover all your own sins. To repent means to return to God. As you return, remember God bias in favor of sinners is so immense that we will be surprised who we find redeemed, forgiven and embraced in the arms of God.

If you ask in your sureness of faith, “Why Repent? . . . I’m UCC,” my answer is: “Repentance is, always and everywhere, a good thing!” So, “Repent!” BECAUSE you are UCC. Amen