

September 5, 2021
Fifteenth after Pentecost / Proper 18

Meditation: "Jesus Repents"

Have you heard the one about the small clapboard country church? One fine Sunday morning in early summer the men of the church were gathered outside talking after worship. One of them commented that the church looked a little shabby, and, in his opinion, it needed a fresh coat of paint to spruce it up. They all agreed, and a plan for repainting the church was developed. They were to meet the following Saturday morning at the church. Saturday morning dawned bright, with not a cloud in the sky. It was a perfect day for painting. It wasn't too hot or too humid, and no rain was forecast for several days. The men gathered in front of the church and waited for the final member to show up with the paint in his pick-up truck. When, at last, the paint arrived, the men looked at it, and then at the church. They looked at the paint again, and again at the church. They did some quick mental calculations, and figured that there was not quite enough paint for the job. "Not to worry," said the pick-up driver. "I also brought some paint thinner. We'll just add some until we have enough paint to cover the church." The men painted all morning, stopped for lunch, and continued until late in the afternoon. As they worked, they joked and enjoyed great fellowship. Finally, the last stroke of paint was applied and the men stood back to admire their efforts. To their horror, a great dark cloud materialized out of nowhere, and it started to pour rain only on the freshly painted church. It rained and rained, until every last drop of paint was washed off. When the final drop of paint dripped from the bottom board, the rain stopped, the clouds dispersed, and a deep booming voice sounded from the heavens, "Repaint, for you have thinned."

Repent. Webster's dictionary defines repent as; "to feel regret or contrition." That's a start. To feel regret or contrition follows admitting or confessing sin or failure, and the first place that happens is to admit or confess our sin or failure to ourself. Without admission or confession, there can be no feeling of regret. But repentance is about more than just feeling badly about something. It's about changing our behaviour. It is about turning from one behaviour and toward another. For example, what good is it if I feel badly about your stinging cheek, if I continue to slap you in the face every time we meet? I must admit to myself that this behaviour is wrong, because it hurts you and, more importantly, because it hurts our relationship. That would be confession. To repent, I must stop slapping you in the face, AND I must start shaking your hand when we meet. The readings today speak to me of repentance. Consider the following story.

Jesus and the disciples have been on road trip. There have been many people from all over the region who have sought Jesus out in the hopes of receiving a healing, or perhaps to hear one of his famous teachings. The Pharisees have also sought out Jesus, hoping to catch him in some failing so they can discredit him and save their own position in society. Jesus and the boys are pooped. They need to get away to Club Med and recharge their

batteries, so off they go to Tyre. They are hoping that their celebrity has not spread to Tyre so that they can have some time away from throngs of adoring fans who all want a piece of Jesus. They arrive at a house, and Jesus enters it. He's far from the madding crowd and is luxuriating in the quiet. He stretches out on a mat inside the house, out of the heat of the midday sun. It feels good to rest. But wait. There is a commotion outside the door. Some awful Greek is arguing with his disciples and demanding an audience with Jesus. Not only is the person Greek, but a woman at that. Does she not know that it is a man's position in the family to seek assistance for his family? And what an awful accent she speaks Aramaic in. He heaves his weary body off the mat just in time. She has forced her way past the disciples, burst into the house and thrown herself at his feet. "Jesus," she demands. "My daughter is possessed by a demon and you must cast it out. She is only a child. Cure her." In his exhaustion, and full of prejudice against the Greeks who long lorded it over the Jews, he does the unthinkable. He calls her a dog and orders her away. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." This is just about the worst thing he can think of to call her. It is still a highly derogatory insult today. Jesus has discriminated against not only the woman, but also against the child, and against every Greek.

I had just finished six long hard years of schooling. It was indescribably difficult to go back to studying after more than a dozen years out of school, at least at first. I had a dream, a goal, a calling. I was going to minister to the people of the church, except the church said that we had not yet reached the fullness of time. I was heartbroken because my agenda was not being met. I was also unemployed and with a family trying to live in Toronto on my wife's salary. I sank into depression. September 11 came. Who cares about the World Trade Centre? What about me? What about my family? Finally the minister at the church we were attending recognized that I was in serious trouble, and getting worse fast. She suggested I volunteer at their drop-in that served the homeless. Homeless, ha! They weren't the people of the church. What did I want to have to do with them? I too was discriminating, against everyone who was not a member of the church.

A rich man walked into the Synagogue. He was wearing fine clothing of purple, and gold. The leader quickly interrupted the service and shoved the poor unsuspecting person seated next to him out of their chair and offered it to the newcomer with a flourish. Moments later, a poor man, dirty, unkempt and wearing only rags appeared in the doorway. The leader glared at him, but allowed him to stay, provided he stayed in the back corner, where nobody would notice him. In this story from James' epistle, the synagogue leader is also discriminating. But how does he know that the rich man isn't a flim-flam artist out to defraud the congregation by promising to let them in on an opportunity that will make them rich beyond belief? How does he know that the poor, dirty, unkempt man isn't the former synagogue leader from the next community who was destroyed by the con and has come to warn them not to fall into the same trap? James warns us against discriminating. James challenges us to examine who it is we discriminate against. What criteria do we use to

discriminate? Clothing? Race? Can you name a few more?..... Who do we exclude from community and why?

Help the homeless? Me? I have my own problems, what do I need to help them with theirs for? Let someone else do it. Nevertheless, I went. I needed something to do other than sleep and mope. Then I discovered something. The homeless were people. People like me. They all had problems, like I had problems. They all needed to eat, like I needed to eat. They all wanted to be accepted, like I wanted to be accepted. They all needed help, like I needed help. They were all God's children, just like I am a child of God. I spent nine months volunteering at the drop-in, and then, through the drop-in, I found part-time employment, working with the homeless. I worked part-time for six months and continued volunteering at the drop-in for those six months. Then, through that job, I was offered full time employment, working with the homeless. That job lasted only six months, because I left it to finally minister to the people of the church. I had ministered for nearly two years, before I was settled in Oil Springs and Oil City, Ontario. It wasn't ministry to people of the church, but it was ministry to God's most vulnerable and marginalized children. And I learned one very important lesson. In blessing others, even when that was the last thing I felt like doing, I was blessed many times over.

The Syrophenician woman was used to being insulted by the Jews. Besides, she was there on behalf of her daughter. A child. A person who was marginalized because of her sex; because of her age; because of her condition. The woman took in the insult and argued that "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs that fall to the floor." What she didn't say was, "I know you hate my people. I know you consider us dogs. But I believe that God sent you to all people, not just your own type, you sexist, racist pig. Your God called your people into a covenant so that through you He could bless all the nations of the earth. Isn't that what your Torah, your law teaches?" She didn't need to say that. Jesus heard it loud and clear in her tone of voice. He had allowed his exhaustion and deep-seated prejudices to rule his tongue. She was right. He was sent to all of God's children, not just the Jews. He himself had said, "Let the little children come unto me," and now there was a child who could not make it on her own, so her mother came in her behalf. He must repent. No more insults. He must bless her and her child rather than curse her. "Go. The demon has left your daughter."

Good news, you ask? To God, we, all of us, are the other. None of us can match God's glory. We are all the Syrophenician woman, the homeless, the addict, the mentally ill when it comes to God. And what is God's response? God doesn't call us dogs and order us away. God doesn't ignore us or hold us with contempt. God doesn't glare at us and tolerate us if we stay in the back corner and promise not to be a bother. God reaches out to us, to heal us, to listen to us, to call us into relationship with God. God reaches out to us to bless us. Think about this as we go through the next couple of weeks of election

campaigning. Who or what are the politicians ignoring? Have we heard the voiceless; the unspoken or unheeded concerns of our society? Can we bring those concerns to bear on the situation? God blesses us, that through us God may bless the others in our society, and in our world. We have responsibilities, and we are not alone. God is with us. Thanks be to God.