

## Repentance verse Penance

**Matthew 4:13–17 (NRSV)** — *Jesus* left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, **14** so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: **15** “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— **16** the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” **17** From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

**Acts 2:36–38 (NRSV)** — “Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.” **37** Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” **38** Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

**The Opening Volley.** The first verbal volley Jesus launched when he began his ministry was *“Repent for the kingdom of God is near.”* This vital message, the call for people to repent, would shape his ministry and mission from beginning to end. To understand and respond to him, repenting was the key.

After having spent nearly three years with Jesus, it *seems the message and act of repenting sunk into the mind and heart of one of Jesus’ disciples, Peter.* After having lived life with Jesus, being a witness to his death, resurrection and ascension, Peter was in sync with this primary message of his master.

When the Holy Spirit fell upon the early followers of Jesus and was manifest by some spectacular signs, the crowds wondered what had happened. Seeing the opening to share clearly about Jesus, Peter spoke up. He told them in clear and convincing terms that this Jesus, whom they had been complicit in crucifying, was indeed God’s messiah. In response to his message, they asked what then needed to do.

Drew from the heart of Jesus’ message Peter replied, *“Repent and be baptized.”* The idea of repenting became the heart of the message and movement of the early followers of Jesus.

The Greek word in the gospel and in Acts translated as “repent” – μετανοέω – *became a key word for Martin Luther that drove him to protest the Roman Church’s belief and practice and became a key cornerstone of his own.* The word and its biblical meaning reshaped his understanding. The word became the fuel of the nuclear reactor of Luther’s reformation.

Martin E. Marty in his book on *Martin Luther asserts our culture has resistance to this idea of repentance.* It is overshadowed by our advertising and celebrity culture of promises of “happiness, smiles and success.” I think he is probably right. It is hardly a popular topic yet it offers to us transformation when we practice genuine repentance. But what if there true life is found in repenting?

### **“Do Penance.”**

If you were here a couple of weeks ago, you may remember I spoke of how the scripture impacted and changed Martin Luther. Well, the development of the Bible in the Roman Church had a huge impact on the understanding of Jesus and Peter’s use of μετανοέω.

The books and letters we know as New Testament were originally written in Greek, which was the official language at that time. As Latin became a more dominate language in the Roman Empire and as Christianity had more and more people who spoke Latin, these books and letters were translated into Latin so the people could read them. Various portions of the texts were translated into Latin by different people. So in 386, the Pope commissioned Jerome to provide a consistent Latin translation. Using the Greek copies of the texts he could locate and revising the Latin translations at hand, he developed what came to be known as the Vulgate Bible which became the official and authoritative text of the Roman Church. It was being used during Luther’s days and even into the last century.

When Jerome translated the word, μετανοέω, into Latin he translated it as *“do penance.”* So Jesus’ opening message was *“Do penance for the kingdom is near.”* When Peter was asked by the crowd how they were to respond, the translation was *“Do penance and be baptized.”*

Those of us who come from a Roman Catholic background probably have an understanding of this concept because it became central act in the Church. For those of us from a purely Protestant background, we are likely to have little knowledge of penance. *So what was penance?*

During the middle ages, penance developed into a systematic rite in the church and was/is considered by the Roman Church as a sacrament. By the time Martin Luther arrived on the scene, this practice was fully developed and woven into the fabric of the Church. In general, we can think of Penance as the act of confession.

Penance in Luther's day had four primary components – **contrition, confession, absolution and satisfaction**. It was exercised as a way for people to insure their sins were forgiven and make a type of restitution so they could be released from eternal punishment for their actions. Living in a day when so many were fearful of being punished by the Righteous God, this rite was important.

The Church maintained penance began with a person experiencing contrition – genuine sorrow for the sin or sins committed. One's guilt and sorrow would drive the penitent to confess. The church said the genuine sorrow was critical for a person to be forgiven.

The Church asserted that only a duly ordained priest could hear one's private confession and pronounce absolution. Only a priest was qualified to announce the person was forgiven and provide instruction for what the person would do next. The exclusive nature of hearing confession by a priest had to do largely with the belief that Peter had been the original head of the Church when Jesus said he was giving him the "keys to the kingdom" and whatever he *"bound on earth would bound in heaven, what he loosed on earth would be loosed in heaven."* It was believed that the succession of clergy had been passed down to them through Peter. So Peter laid hands on the person who laid hands on the person who laid hands on the person who ordained the priest. It was a type of clergy spiritual tree. So the priests had the "keys to the kingdom" to announce forgiveness of sins.

So the priest could offer absolution – declare the person was forgiven. Humanly speaking they did not have the power to forgive but to announce God had forgiven in Christ. This was seen as a judicial action.

This, however, did not take away the punishment for the penitent's sin. One would have to make satisfaction for sin – being told to do some religious action, buy an indulgence or inflict some self-suffering. The person would have to "satisfy" God's justice.

It seems there is something about this aspect of penance that appeals to most human beings. You see, most among us feel that if we have done something wrong we need to pay for our actions or behavior. I must do something for God to love me again. I must act in a special way so God will forgive. We are attracted to an earning of our forgiveness. If I can earn it, I can control it.

## The Reform.

Martin Luther joined others before him who had huge concerns about both how penance was practiced and its theological foundations. His initial concern was his sense the sacrament as exercised in his day lent itself to abuse and manipulation for in his words "lucre" (money) and ambition. Priests were taking advantage of people and leading them deeper into schemes to fund Church projects and making themselves more and more important. It seemed the people imagined the priests had the power to forgive sins.

Luther believed the system of Penance was not fully rooted in scripture. He was a firm believer in confession and knew its importance in the lives of believers. He affirmed James instructions for us *to confess our sins to one another* (5:14). Luther knew the value of confessing could relieve a person's conscience. (It is truly a step to freedom – this is one of the reasons open share recovery groups are so powerful.) Luther also understood it was so important for the penitent to hear the announcement of God's forgiveness through the cross of Jesus Christ.

Luther proclaimed that this act of confession could be before a priest or a fellow believer. He felt Jesus' words saying that whatever one forgives on earth was forgiven in heaven was intended for all believers, not just for priests. Luther was opening the way to an understanding of the "priesthood" of all believers.

Perhaps what troubled Luther most was Church's insistence on "satisfaction." He asked if any of us could earn our forgiveness. Can you do anything to erase or cancel sins you have

committed? Luther held tightly to the understanding that Jesus had died for our sins to not only bring the judicial forgiveness but also to cancel the eternal punishment for them. If he was right, the fear in which people lived could be taken away because Jesus atones fully for the people's sins. Imagine this, people who follow Christ can live joyfully knowing their sins are forgiven and they have a place with God in paradise.

Luther's criticisms and reforms were never intended to get rid of confession and absolution (the announcement of forgiveness). He believed these were important for believers.

Unfortunately, much of the Protestant Church has pushed these to the side and have lost the power and importance of them. While we can take our confessions directly to God, there is a redemptive aspect for confession to one another. We need to be a confessing people. It is critical to our spiritual health and freedom.

### **Repentance.**

For Luther, there was something deeper for the Christian. As he read and studied scripture, he came to understand this word, μετανοέω, as central to our living out our lives in Christ. He understood the basic meaning of this word was a "change of mind" or a "change of heart." So to repent was not a ritual but a re-orientation of one's mind. In my terms it is a redirecting of our life.

Luther believed Christians are to live a life of repentance. It is not a one-time event or experience. It is an on-going activity for Jesus people.

Luther was onto something very important. You see our life in Christ is a journey not just an event or even a series of events. As we live out our lives and are sensitive to the Holy Spirit, we discover the need to adjust our thinking and our course. On one side of things, the basic rule of entropy takes place inside us – that is things tend to fall apart into chaos, we let our disciplines slide. We come to those times when we need to get back on the narrow road again – repent. At times we find we have yielded to temptation and sinned. We have the need to confess and re-orient our thinking and lives to where we are centered in Christ. Then there are those times when we realize new things about God's kingdom, who we are in Christ and living out our lives. So we need to adjust our thinking and action. We do have the need to live a life of repentance.

Please allow me to share about this in my personal life. In the last few months I have been going through a season of repentance. On one level I have found some spiritual entropy taking place. In the midst of this, I was led to some sources for spiritual development that have been bouncing around in my brain like a pinball caught the machine bouncing from spring launcher to launcher.

I have come to realize my life is so full without margins. I have lived in a way that busyness is the equivalent of effectiveness. At times, I imagine if I don't do it, things will not happen. I kind of have been playing God. So re-orienting my thinking and life so God is truly at the center, I take time to rest, reflect, recreate and renew is vital. This is in process and I believe will be for some time. I am searching for Sabbath. This is a season of repentance for me.

### **Response.**

How about for you? Are there things in your life that are keeping you from the full depth of relationship with God? What do you have to confess? Are there adjustments the Spirit is nudging you to make? Is this a time of repentance for you?