

2020 01 26 – Repent

Matthew 4:12-23

One of the most interesting things that we do at our Wednesday bible study, as we read each week's scripture passages, is to compare and contrast the different versions of the bible. How many English versions of the bible do you think there are? Well, according to Wikipedia, there are over 450 different versions written in the English language. In The United Church of Canada we tend to use the *New Revised Standard Version*, and here at First United we often read from *The Inclusive Bible*. At bible study we always have those two versions plus three or four more. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_English_Bible_translations

This week we spent some time comparing one particular line in today's reading from the gospel of Matthew. We realized it was a key part of the scripture because we were told that, "From that time on, Jesus began proclaiming [this] message." This is the core message of Jesus' ministry. So it probably warrants a detailed study. This message is found in Matthew 4:17b. Here are three of the versions of the scripture sentence that we considered:

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (NRSV)

"Change your hearts and minds, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."
(Inclusive Bible)

"Change your life, God's kingdom is here." (The Message)

These are all quite different, aren't they! And yet, they are all translated from the same Greek words. What I am going to do is break up this short sentence into

three parts. First, let's look at the word, "repent." If I stood on a street corner yelling, "Repent! Repent!." How would you react? What would you think I was saying? (*wait for answers – feel guilty, feel sorry about actions, inactions, thoughts, feel really bad about the horrible, sinful person that I am, to ask for forgiveness*) Guilt, remorse, contrition, yes these are some of the feelings that this word typically brings up in our hearts and our minds.

But if we go back to the Greek, the word that is being translated is "metanoia." Metanoia means to think differently, to have a change of mind and heart, to have a change of consciousness. It's like we turn around, do "a 180" in how we think and how we feel and even how we act. We change our hearts and minds and thus we change our lives. For Jesus, and for us, this means turning to God, turning to the essence of love, turning to the light of the world. Repentance, is much more than feeling guilty or sorry, repentance is about changing our whole way of understanding and being and doing in the world.

Anne Lamott, a well-known Christian writer, put it this way:

Repent just means to change direction--and NOT to be said by someone who is wagging their forefinger at you. Repentance is a blessing. Pick a new direction, one you wouldn't mind ending up at, and aim for that. Shoot the moon.

<https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/05/16/anne-lamott-people-pleasing-haters-trolls/>

This week I found a website called Metanoia.org. I want to share with you this illustration that is included on their home page I invite you now to close your eyes and to imagine.

Imagine you are standing in a circle of people. In the center of the circle, there is a source of light. But rather than facing the center and the light, you are standing with your back to the light, facing outward.

When you stand this way, facing away from the light, all you can see is your own shadow. You cannot see the light. You can only look into your shadow.

You cannot see the others in the circle with you. From what you can see, you are disconnected and alone in the dark.

Now imagine that you turn around to face the light that is in the center of the circle. When you turn toward the light, you no longer see only darkness. When you turn toward the light, your shadow is behind you.

When you turn toward the light, you can now see the other people who are standing with you. You can see that the light is shining on everyone and that you are all connected in its radiance.

Making the decision to turn around, to turn away from shadow, to face the light: this is metanoia. <https://metanoia.org/light.htm>

I would also say, that this is repentance. This is what it means to repent.

I will invite you now to open your eyes, because this brings us to the second phrase in our scripture sentence. Jesus is saying, "Change your hearts and minds, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" So what is the kingdom or kingdom of heaven? First of all we need to recognize that the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God are the same thing. Most scholars agree that the author of the gospel of Matthew used the word "heaven" in order to avoid saying "God." This is still common among the members of the Jewish religion. They feel it is irreverent to say God's name, so Jewish people often replace it with other words like "Lord," or "heaven."

So what is the kingdom of God? To quote Marcus Borg, a world-renowned Jesus scholar,

it is what life would be like on earth if God were king and the rulers of this world were not. The Kingdom of God is about God's justice in contrast to the systemic injustice of the kingdoms and domination systems of this world. (*Heart of Christianity*, page 132-133)

The kingdom of God is what happens when we turn toward the light, toward the essence of love, towards God. When we repent, when we turn toward the sacred, we can see the other people who are standing with us and we can see that God's light is shining on everyone and that we are all connected in its radiance. Then we know that we are all children of God and that God's love

extends to everyone, even those we would call our enemies. God's reign on earth is a reign of peace and justice for all. It is more like a kingdom than a kingdom. Jesus is calling us to change our hearts, our minds, our lives so that we can be a part of building God's reign on earth. For Jesus, and for all who follow Jesus, repentance is both internal and external, it is both a personal and a political action.

Finally, what does it mean to say that the kingdom of heaven is "at hand," "is here," or "has come near?" It means the God's reign of peace and justice is possible, it is within our grasp. It means that Jesus' coming to earth brought it even closer. It means that by following Jesus' life and teachings we are moving this world towards the kingdom of heaven.

This is the good news! This is the reason for Jesus' ministry. This is why Simon and Andrew and James and John and all the disciples followed Jesus, this is why we follow Jesus. The last line in today's reading tells us that "Jesus traveled throughout Galilee, teaching in the synagogues, proclaiming the Good News of the kingdom of heaven and healing all kinds of diseases and sicknesses among the people." Jesus came to this earth to teach and to heal and to proclaim the good news of God's reign of peace and justice on earth.

So repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near! Change your hearts and minds, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand! Change your life, God's kingdom is here!