



## *“The Power of Repentance & Forgiveness”*

Luke 24:44-53; Acts 1:1-11

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Seventh Sunday of Easter

There are many things to preach about from both our scripture lessons. But after reading the texts over and over again for several days, I still could not figure out what the focus of this sermon was to be. Was I to focus on “staying in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high,” which had often been the theme of the sermons I heard related to these texts, or was there something else? Then one Monday night around 8:30 in the evening, the line in our Luke texts that says, “Repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” jumped out.

Why that line? Then I thought, the theme always has to speak or preach to the preacher first. Did I need to confront an unresolved issue of repentance and forgiveness in my own life? What do we need to understand about the “proclamation of repentance and forgiveness,” or better yet, what do we need to understand about the “power of repentance and forgiveness”? I could not answer these questions until I grappled with what Luke meant by the words “repentance and forgiveness” within the New Testament. We’ll explore what these words mean in the context of a story about Elwin Hope Wilson who was featured in the news last month.

Elwin, a sad sickly 72-year-old man, has been haunted by time. As he was being interviewed about his story, the interviewer was distracted by antique clocks, at least a hundred of them, that filled up his neat ranch home on Tillman Street, in Rock Hill, South Carolina. Grandfather clocks, mantel clocks, cuckoos, and Westminster, all were ticking, chiming and clanging in an hourly cacophony that measures the passing days. But why does Elwin have all those clocks? When he was asked, he had no answer. His wife of 49 years is still trying to figure out what they are doing around the house.

Maybe what the clocks symbolize is all the time Elwin spent pondering his life, the time he spent in hate – hating black people.

Elwin was a former Ku Klux Klan who has repented and has asked for forgiveness for the cross burnings on Hollis Lake Road; for hanging a black doll in a noose at the end of his driveway; for flinging cantaloupes at black men walking down Main Street; for hurling threats at a black kid for jiggling a soda machine in his father’s service station; and for brutally beating a 21-year-old seminary student at a Greyhound bus station in 1961.

He has been carrying his apology into black churches and has even taken it to Washington, D.C., to the office of Congressman John Lewis of Atlanta, the civil rights leader, who was the young seminarian at the bus station during the famed Freedom Rides in 1961, where black and white students traveled through the South, testing the new desegregation laws at bus station restaurants and restrooms.

Where did all the hate come from? And where did it go? Elwin said it bothered him for years all the bad stuff he did. But he brandished his meanness like a badge of honor. To mess with Elwin, he said, meant a fist in your face, especially if you happened to be black.

Elwin has even apologized to his son, who as a teenager would see his father hollering at blacks in restaurants, sneering at them in public, and brazenly using the N-word in front of his son's teen friends.

The men to whom Elwin has apologized said they forgave the person and others who tormented them a long time ago, although they find it strange and somewhat discomfoting to suddenly be confronted by a real name, a real man, a hater of blacks, who wants to repent. But one of his victims said, "I think it is a testament to how the world has changed and how hearts have changed." Another said, "It's not for me to judge another man's heart."

Elwin said he feels the shame of his behavior but has been surprised by how liberated the apologies have made him feel. He said, "People don't understand the burden of carrying all that hate." And Elwin now feels a profound sense of peace and no longer feels doomed. He said, "I don't feel the same hate."

An African American woman hearing Elwin's story wrote to him that his apology touched her heart. Maybe all those clocks represent the change that can occur during the passing of time.

The common understanding of repentance has always related to regret and feelings of deep sorrow. Look in any dictionary and that's the definition you will find. Even in Biblical Hebrew, that's the idea of repentance. But in the New Testament, the word translated as "repentance" is the Greek *metanoia* which has to do with time and change. *Metanoia* means "to think differently after." It merely means a change of mind or heart about someone or something. It's about taking in a whole new point of view and finding a better way.

Alexander Pope, regarded as the greatest English poet of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and best known for his satirical verse and for his translation of Homer, wrote in *An Essay on Criticism*, "To err is human, to forgive divine."

Forgiveness really is a generous act. It not only implies giving up the idea that an offense should be punished, but also relinquishing any feelings of resentment or vengefulness.

So we go back to our text that says, "...the Messiah is to suffer and on the third day to rise from the dead, and ...repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

The power from on high to repent and forgive is energized by the Spirit of God. Our ability to repent and forgive cannot and does not start outside of ourselves. It's an event that happens deep within the bosom of our souls.

So in our Acts text, Jesus tells his disciples, "... not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. 'This,' he said, 'is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'" But our dear disciples were confused and so they asked their Lord, "Are you restoring the kingdom to Israel at this time?" And Jesus responded, "The times and the seasons that the father has reserved to his own authority are not yours to know. Instead, you will receive a power from the Holy Spirit coming upon you. And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Jesus is saying here, in time something will change. Stop looking outside of yourself for this event. It's not the kingdom of Israel that needs to be restored. It's you. You need to be restored; you need to be made whole; you need the strength; the motivation and the inspiration to do what I have called you to do. Proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins. I am going to help you change your mind about how you think about yourself and the people around you. I, the Lord, am looking past your offenses and you need to do the same. I am going to help you look past your resentments and your vengefulness as in the case of Elwin. You will witness your own change and you will witness changes, the change of mind, the change of heart, in others as you proclaim repentance and forgiveness; therein lies its power.

A few weeks ago, Rev. Fisher and I were reminiscing about how I got here, to Plymouth. I had already completed a field placement in a non-parish setting during the 2007-08 academic year and had no intention of doing another one. But I was encouraged by the Field Education Director to explore a parish ministry setting as an advanced field placement. She felt that if I took advantage of a variety of field education opportunities during my seminary experience such as hospital chaplaincy, non-parish and parish ministry, it would help me to discern my vocational path. After sending my resume to a few churches in spring of 2008, I was offered several interviews, which included one here, at Plymouth. Although there was interest in me from the other churches where I interviewed, my heart was leaning toward this church. I notified Rev. Fisher of my desire to intern at Plymouth for the 2008-09 academic year and then got cold feet. I thought, "Maybe I should stay at the church where I had been for almost 9 years." I was always a risk taker, but now fear set in, fear of change and the fear that I had no idea of where this change would ultimately lead me. When I informed Rev. Fisher I would stay where I was, something happened. I felt restless and uneasy and would feel it intensely until I changed course. I needed to make a turn. So I contacted Rev. Fisher asking if I could continue a conversation with him about interning at Plymouth. The restlessness and uneasiness disappeared, and here I stand.

A few weeks ago I was offered a post-graduate hospital chaplain residency position. As if I didn't learn the lesson the first time, upon deciding to intern at Plymouth, I deferred making an immediate decision because prior to the chaplaincy interview, I was scheduled to interview for a pastoral residency program at a church not too far from where I live in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Accepting the chaplain residency felt like the right thing to do from the start, but I reasoned that since I was already scheduled for the pastoral residency interview which would occur over a two-day period, I might as well go through with it. When I got there something inside screamed, "This is not it; you don't need to go any further; turn back to your initial offer." Upon accepting the chaplain residency position, the uneasiness and doubt went away.

This turning or redirection is not the repentance of regret and deep sorrow. It is merely a change of mind and heart. It is an internal instigation of the Holy Ghost or what we call in our tradition "the inner witness of the Holy Spirit" which plays a central role, not only in repentance and forgiveness, but in the whole of the Christian life.

There is a mystery surrounding how repentance and forgiveness really happen. But we have the opportunity like Elwin and like me, to await an encounter with the spirit of God from within to change our minds and hearts; so that we let go of the hate, resentment, hurt, doubt, or confusion that springs up inside of us causing us mental, emotional, and spiritual grief.

In the final passages of our Luke text, it says "...Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing

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God.” Why were they blessing God? They finally understood what Jesus was commissioning them to do after he would leave them, and this commissioning is for you as well: *“Receive the power of repentance and forgiveness and then proclaim it to the entire world.”*

Amen.

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