

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19  
Matthew 3:1-12

St. John's Presbyterian Church  
Devon, Pennsylvania  
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## Living the Bonus

Bear fruit that befits repentance. *Matthew 3:8*

The theme of Matthew's text on the opening of the ministry of John the Baptist (Jesus' immediate forerunner), is repentance. Sadly, repentance has gotten a bad wrap in Christianity. It often bears the dispiriting burden of self reprisal, punishment, guilt and penance. But John, who does much to introduce the theme of repentance into the gospels, which his cousin and, perhaps early disciple, Jesus carries on, adds a huge component that is often missing. John invites people to baptism through the doorway of repentance to a life newly formed, and all the blessings that accrue.

John Howard Yoder a Mennonite scholar and seminary president, was one of the most influential theologians of the last half-century. In his 1971 book, *The Original Revolution* he writes,

To repent is not to feel bad but to think differently. . . . If anyone repents, if anyone turns around to follow Jesus in the new way of life, this will do something for the aimlessness of his life. It will do something for his loneliness, giving him fellowship. It will do something for his anxiety and guilt. . . . If anyone repents, it will do something for his intellectual confusion, by giving him a heritage to appreciate, and a conscience about telling it as it is. . . . If a man repents it will do something for his moral weakness by giving him the focus for wholesome self-discipline.

This, says Yoder, is the peculiar *bonus* of entering the Christian life through repentance. Living beyond repentance becomes *living the bonus*.

Let me offer a simple personal example of living the bonus. Like many of you, for years now Jane and I have been recycling the common stuff like plastic and glass. It's a minor chore, but a personally satisfying one. Then, a couple of years ago I read an extraordinary book by Lester R. Brown called *Plan B, 2.0: Rescuing a Planet Under Stress and a Civilization in Trouble* (2006). It was one of the most compelling things I've ever read; the sort of book that leads you think and act differently. I started saving cardboard and our occasional newspapers, but still consigning the vast majority of our so-called "trash" to the Monday and Thursday pickups.

Then, earlier this year, I set myself the challenge to see how *little* we could actually throw away. Then Jane got the idea of beginning to compost in readiness for a vegetable garden next year. So I built a composter, and now we find ourselves taking out three one gallon containers each week. That's the equivalent of three fifty gallon oil drums full each year. It breaks down faster than I can put in banana skins, orange peel, old flowers and vegetable peelings. Never any apple cores. Molly, our yellow lab gets all those. The clear majority of so-called trash by weight each month is paper—wrapping, bags, junk mail, scribbled notes, old files. I really enjoy sifting through all the recyclables twice a week. It takes maybe 10-15 minutes, total. It's great not having to replace the kitchen garbage bag three times a week, or roll the big containers to the road. In terms of sheer bulk, the winner is plastic. I also lump together metals, like tuna cans and aluminum foil, glass jar lids, and old dry-cleaning hangers. You can scarcely imagine how much we *don't* put in the 'garbage'. Probably 95 percent of the everything we consume now goes to be recycled.

The bottom line to all this is that it gives me such a heightened value of and care for a good earth which, as Paul put it to us last week is "a creation groaning to be set free from its bondage"—we might say 'a bondage

to our former indifference,” before we started to be aware of our over indulgence of earth’s resources. This is the personal benefit of a “repentance” toward God’s good earth and all that it provides my family. Such a repentance doesn’t make me feel bad. On the contrary, it makes me feel immeasurably better because my actions and motivations are better.

This is small personal activity, but it has immense human potential, not just ecologically. I offer this in the context of our massive scale indifference as a nation (until very recently) to the limited resources of earth, which we Americans have been consuming faster for a century or more out of all proportion to our numbers on planet earth. yet it does not stop here. A pervasive sense of national entitlement has driven us also to the present economic crisis. If anything, our habits and our present plight tell us that we need a large scale repentance, a national repentance. (Remember: repentance is not about feeling bad in frenzied self flagellation, but about acting differently.) Caring too little for the consequences took us to the edge of a precipitous horror this week, one that we still must bear the consequences of, no matter which way it turns out. It was a week in which the U.S. economy continued to melt down (and may continue), resurrecting the apocalyptic image of the 1970s (“The China Syndrome”) in which a Three Mile Island-like nuclear core could have burned clear through the earth—in this case with repercussions to a fearfully integrated global economy and financial system. If ever repentance, as *acting differently*, prodded us in the face with a pitchfork, it was our national habits and lack of responsible conduct that were held up to scrutiny.

For decades, under both parties, our government has been committing adultery with the corporate world when it was supposed to be wedded to “the commons,” to “We the people.” “Government,” Lincoln reminded us after Gettysburg, “of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.” Well, we have been to the edge and looked over, and it is not a pretty sight. Neither are “the commons” guilt free. Many people bought beyond their means or turned an ostrich eye to the small print on their mortgages. Many were also taken gross advantage of.

A non-partisan national repentance is very much in order. Repentance was the *only thing* that John and Jesus asked of us if the Kingdom of God, which they both heralded and promised, was to be fulfilled. Repentance—living, acting differently, as a people. Demanding of our governance the conduct, the morals, and the faithfulness we set and expect of ourselves.

After 9-11 (which disaster we almost celebrated this month with one on the verge of far more reaching proportions), we had an opportunity to show the world what we were made of, what drives the heart and soul of our nation. One Senator offered, “God may give them mercy, but they’ll get none from us.” Tony Campolo, the evangelical activist and one of the Mainline’s beloved local sons, was present at the great prayer meeting held under the Capitol dome shortly after the disaster. Senator Mikulski of Maryland, offered this. “I pray, dear God, that you will bring those who perpetrated this evil . . .” and Campolo said he was waiting for her to say “to justice,” when she said, “*to repentance.*”

Tony Campolo went on to say, “And that’s our hope, people. If we keep on returning evil for evil, violence for violence, we’ll get nowhere. It’s only when in fact we and they come to repentance and change our ways that a new dawn will dawn.”

There is no escaping this as the path Jesus chose, taught, and lived out. All four gospels and every New Testament writer understand that the cross is not merely the end of Jesus’ earthly story but the violent end he knew he would face and chose not to resist. Had he resisted, had he bypassed the cross for some other route to recognition—you would not be sitting here and I would not be speaking to you on his behalf, because there would be no faith, no church, nothing worthy of belief to put our ultimate trust in. The cross, what Paul with masterful irony called “foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.” Yet its power resides in it’s being *lived-out* in us, nothing less.

Repentance is not *a* theme of the gospels, one among many. It is *the* theme, the door through which Jesus called all people to baptism and a life very differently committed to God and each other. It comes at the price of personal change and living a life of a very different order. So different that it stands out. Yet it promises the living bonus of life richly graced, even in the midst of its great trials—which is infinitely more a blessing than living through trials devoid of grace and the companionship of God. It requires of us a life that issues in deep personal change, and builds a very different kingdom than we have known thus far.

If we learned anything this past week—*God, please!*—hopefully it wasn’t that the stock market regained much of its losses! 700 billion dollars (that \$700,000,000,000! amounts to \$2,333 for every man woman and

child in the United States.) Hopefully, we have learned how better to live, and teach our children and grandchildren differently. To live more simply, more faithfully toward God and each other, and to demand of those we elect, whomever they may be, that *we the people* will not tolerate self-interest or blindness. Because our God insists that for us to bear the God-name is to be a people differently formed, a repentant people.

Amen.