

Repenting as a Practice of Faith

Luke 13:1-9

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-19

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Do you remember Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood? It ran on television from 1968-2001—and then with reruns until 2008. Every episode began the same way: Fred Rogers comes home, takes off his suit coat, hangs it up in the closet, puts on his cardigan sweater, zips it up, takes off his dress loafers, and puts on his sneakers. I would always have to laugh to myself from the kitchen while my kids watched Mr. Rogers. I couldn't believe how they were mesmerized. To me, compared to Sesame Street and other shows on TV, it was so old-fashioned and boring, but to my kids when they were little, it was wonderful. They were captivated; they knew just exactly what Mr. Rogers was going to do: come home, take off his coat, put on his sweater, zip it up, take off his loafers, and put on his sneakers—every day! It was a ritual.

There was something very comforting about this coming-home ritual. (Coming home isn't always comforting for everybody, I know. Home may be a dysfunctional place, with bad memories. Some children don't have a home to come home to at all. And many go to long hours of daycare before they get to go home.) But I think we'd all like coming home to be a pleasant and predictable ritual. We'd like it to be a familiar experience of warmth, comfortable clothes, good food, and loving people.

We have a familiar story of coming home in the Bible. The story of the prodigal son has two parts: the son's repentance and the father's forgiveness. Today we'll look at the son's repentance, his homecoming. Next week we'll finish the story with the father's forgiveness and the homecoming party.

The son—no name, because it could be any of us—says on his way home, "I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" Here in a nutshell is the son's repentance. It has three parts:

1. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you;
2. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; and
3. treat me like one of your hired hands."

These three phrases give us a concise and quite clear example of repentance, which has 3 parts: confession, contrition, and penance. The first phrase is **confession**: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you." The second phrase is **contrition**: "I am no longer worthy to be called your son." And the third phrase is **penance**: "Treat me like one of your hired hands."

A person does not fully repent unless the person has met these conditions: confession, contrition, and penance. The person must openly acknowledge the wrongdoing (confession). He or she must feel remorse for the past behavior (contrition). And he or she

must be willing to perform an act as a consequence for wrongdoing (penance).

According to the Bible, it is not enough just to hope and pray for pardon; one must humble oneself, acknowledge a wrong committed, and resolve to depart from sin. The inner feeling of remorse must be followed by *deed*. The way the writers of the Old Testament speak of repentance is with the Hebrew verb, *shuv*, which in translation means *to turn or return*. Because the word *shuv* means both turn and return, it explains repentance well: the biblical idea of repentance is to turn away from evil and to return to good again and again. Or we could say to repent means *to come back to God*. The writers of the Bible say clearly that sin is not a stain for life, rather it is straying from the right path, and we have the human power given to us by God to turn back and redirect our destiny, back onto the right path.

The New Testament was written in Greek, and the Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*, which denotes *a change of mind*, and *a change of lifestyle*. It is more than a change in how one feels; it has to do with a change in how one lives. So both in Hebrew in the Old Testament and in Greek in the New Testament, the scriptures talk about repentance as living in a new way. This is something we don't just think about, we do.

Turning back to God is something we *can* do. At least it is something we can do in situations where we have control. As a world community, we have just experienced devastating earthquakes first in Haiti and then in Chile. These are not situations of sin that we can reverse. They are natural disasters. In these situations, like the tragedies that the writer of Luke mentions in our first reading today, we feel helpless. That Pilate ordered the Galileans to be slain is a situation of political oppression beyond the control of the Jewish people in Jesus' company. That the Tower of Siloam fell on 18 people in Jerusalem was a tragedy beyond the control of the people standing by. We cannot fix a situation so overwhelming as an earthquake or a political act of violence or the toppling of a building. We simply cannot. But in the situations of our lives where we *have* control, we have the opportunity for repentance. This is what Jesus is saying when he says, "Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." In other words, our very lives depend on departing from wrong and choosing right. That's why Jesus spoke of the fig tree that was barren, but then full of fruit. We can come home to God and live an abundant life.

The prodigal son came home to God when he came home to his father and repented. He wanted to set things right. He wanted his life to bear fruit.

Really, for faithful people, our life is a journey of trying to stay on the right path. One of my favorite books is by Willa Cather, *Death Comes For the Archbishop*. The book is the story of a French priest who goes into the mission field to spread the gospel in the new territory called New Mexico in the mid 1800s. Father Jean Latour has a series of homecomings. Like Jesus in the wilderness, he is stranded in the desert and then finds water in a Mexican village. Not only the water, but also the relationships he makes are renewing: He brings corrupt priests back to faithfulness, and he befriends the Native Americans, whether or not they accept the Christian faith. Each time he meets up with his boyhood friend, another French priest, it is a homecoming, a chance to speak his native language and renew the calling they share. It is interesting that the title of the book is *Death Comes For the*

Archbishop. The book is about 40 years in the life of the archbishop, not only about his death. But his death is the greatest homecoming of all. In his last days, Father Latour reflects on the cathedral he built in Santa Fe. He reflects on the return of the Navaho Indians to their native land that had been taken from them. He reflects on the land itself and its rugged beauty and its power and resilience. He approaches his death appreciative of the relationships and experiences of his life. The reader sees his death as a homecoming, like a peaceful passage into a familiar room.

Father Latour wakened with a grateful sense of nearness to his Cathedral—which would also be his tomb. He felt safe under its shadow; like a boat come back to harbor, lying under its own sea wall. He was in his old study; the Sisters had sent a little iron bed from the school for him, and their finest linen and blankets. He felt a great content at being here, where he had come as a young man and where he had done his work. The room was little changed; the same [Indian] rugs and skins on the earth floor, the same desk with his candlesticks, the same thick, wavy white walls that muted sound, that shut out the world and gave repose to the spirit (271). It was a homecoming of repose.

Another figure from American literature, John Proctor, in Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible*, gives us a powerful illustration of coming home. Whereas the priest, Father Latour, had been a righteous man who brought religion and reforms to those around him, John Proctor had sinned. He had committed adultery, and he admitted his guilt. But when his wife took the witness stand, she denied his guilt, lying in order to save him. John had already told all, but then when he was falsely accused of witchcraft, at first he confessed to save his life, but then, in the final moment, refused to sign his name to a document that would send his fellow townspeople to death. He would rather die than implicate innocent people. John Proctor goes to his death, having repented for his sin, and retaining his honor. Though the mass hysteria of the town of Salem condemns him as a "witch," he dies with a clear conscience, a free man.

When the prodigal son returns home, he has set his path right. He is no longer a person in a foreign land, wandering aimlessly, like someone lost in a desert. He is no longer fooling himself or blaming others for the state of his life. He has faced it straight on. He has reflected on his choices and decided that they were foolish, and wrong. "He came to himself," the text says. So he bravely makes new choices and faces the consequences squarely. He comes home courageously admitting how he has failed his family and his God. He is compelled to turn things around for his own honor.

If we think about how we would live were it the end of our days, we might have the resolve of this young man. We might "come to ourselves" and say, "'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son [or your daughter]; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" We might "come to ourselves" and say, "I have made a mess of my life; I am not worthy of all you have given to me; treat me as you will—but I am coming home and I want to live again!" You may have made mistakes, and love may have taken quite a beating. But it is never too late to love again. It is never too late to say, "I'm sorry." It's never too late to come home.

This is the new life we have when we choose to turn to God, to return to God. When we know we've done the right thing, it doesn't even matter any more what happens—just that we've come to a turning point and it has led us home again. And when we come home to God, we can say, "It is well with my soul."