

A Sermon for Advent 3, Year B
December 11, 2005
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Repenting in Action & Attitude.

Despite everything I said about John the Baptist in my sermon last week – especially the fact that many of his followers believed him to be the Messiah – I feel I should make it clear that there is nothing in the scriptures to suggest that John thought he was the Messiah. But scripture does make it clear that the message John proclaimed is one we need to pay attention to, for it is a message of repentance, of changing the course of our life.

To the rich, John encouraged them to stop hoarding their possessions, and instead share their food and clothing with those who lacked such things. To the tax collectors, John encouraged them to stop over-taxing people – especially the poor, who had no way to resist the pressure placed upon them – and simply to collect what was right. And to the soldiers, John encouraged them not to use the threat of force or harm to extort money from the people, but rather he encouraged them to be satisfied with the wages for which they had agreed to work. Even Jesus proclaimed that same message of repentance, encouraging the woman caught in adultery (a capital offence, I might add) to go and sin no more.

The theme of repentance is not only common in the New Testament, it is also featured prominently in the Old as well. And, as I mentioned before, repentance is changing the direction of your life, and the way you do things. Repentance is a timely subject, for on Tuesday, Stanley “Tookie” Williams is scheduled for execution at San Quentin State Prison in California.

In 1979, Williams was convicted of the murder of four people in the Los Angeles area. Williams has always claimed his innocence in the killings, which is not really all that surprising. But what is surprising is the fact that Williams was one of the founders of the notorious Crips gang. However, more than two decades on Death Row has changed the man. He has become a major figure in the gang peace movement. Through the many books he’s co-authored from prison, his message to young people has been consistent and clear: Violence is never a solution, and he urges young gang kids to get out before it destroys them and the lives of their family members. And in a 1993 summit for gang members in Los Angeles, Williams (via videotape) told the hundreds who had gathered: “I never thought I could change my life,” and that “I thought I would be a Crip forever. But I developed common sense, wisdom and knowledge. I changed.” He has consistently encouraged young people to seek an alternative life beyond violence, and he stressed that prison was no place to spend a life.

I think it’s clear that Williams has repented. But the question that is most important is this: do his repentance, and the positive things he’s done since his conviction, merit having his sentence changed from death by lethal injection to life in prison? Many people have answered that question with a resounding ‘yes’, and have argued that, alive, Williams will remain a powerful advocate for keeping young people out of gangs. But many others have answered that question with an equally

resounding ‘no’, arguing that a repentant criminal is still a criminal, and that anyone convicted of murder deserves to die.

But the question that is especially relevant to Christians is this: Can people like Stanley “Tookie” Williams really make a positive difference in this world? And, can they become useful to God? Obviously, the answer is ‘yes’, because we have a lot of examples of such people in the Bible. Abraham, Jacob, and David are all examples of men who were scoundrels and liars, outlaws and murderers, who became prominent spiritual and political leaders in ancient Israel. But the most prominent example for Christians is that of Saint Paul.

When we are first introduced to Paul in the book of Acts, he was a lackey for the Jewish religious leaders, and his job was to search out and apprehend Jews who had converted to Christianity. He then turned them over to the religious leaders for trial and, not unusually, execution. In fact, the first Christian martyr, Saint Stephen, a deacon, died as a result of such an event, and Paul was a witness and supporter of those who executed him. But as we all know, Paul had his “Damascus-road experience”, his life was changed, and, perhaps second only to Jesus, became the most influential force in shaping the early Christian church.

Our history – both the sacred and the secular – is replete with hundreds of examples of men and women who committed terrible acts, but who repented, and transformed their lives, and became powerful agents for good, and useful tool in God’s hands. There are an equal number of examples of men and women who did not, or could not, repent. And I make this point simply to illustrate how hard it can be to really repent, how hard it is to change the direction of one’s life.

But repenting of our actions is only one part of the problem. Repenting of our thoughts and attitudes and prejudices is just as important, and can be even harder. And this may be our real Advent challenge: Changing the way we think of certain people; resisting the temptation to come to specific conclusions about people based only on the way they look, or dress, or act, or speak. And this is so important, because if we fail to do so we run the risk of becoming intolerant, narrow-minded, rigid and inflexible. In other words, we run the risk of becoming exactly the opposite of what God intends for us.

When I was about six years old, my family moved to the small island nation of Taiwan. (My father was in the Army, and he was stationed at the Naval base on the outskirts of the capital city of Taipei. And my family lived in a small brick house in the little village of Tien Mou.) It was a land of strange sights and sounds, of strange smells and even stranger people. It would have been hard not to dislike the place immediately, because it unlike anything I had experienced in my short life. But I was very fortunate, because my first friend in Taiwan, and the boy who remained my friend for the five years we lived there, was the son of the Taiwanese couple who worked for my parents. That boy and his family taught me a lot about the culture and cuisine, and language and customs of a people who were as different from me as any I could imagine. But probably the most important thing I learned from them was patience and tolerance, and understanding and acceptance. And these are such important traits for anyone to have.

Try to imagine what our faith community would be like if God hadn't had the patience and tolerance, and understanding and acceptance with men like Abraham and Jacob and David. Try to imagine what the Christian church would be like if those early Christians hadn't exhibited those same traits with Paul, the man who hunted down Christian converts, and whom they had taken under their wings. And today, we have the opportunity to ask the same question with regards to Stanley "Tookie" Williams, a convicted murderer, a notorious gang leader, but who has repented and dramatically changed his life. Can we exhibit those same traits towards him?

The message of Advent has always been the same: repent. But we need to remember that we need to repent not only of our actions, but also of our attitudes.

Let us pray: Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may so move every human heart, that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.