

PROPER 19, September 15, 2019, Year C

- Our Gospel reading this morning prompts me to think of a *paradox*: We know that indulging in some *bad* things, can make us feel *good*. Yet, *how is it that* doing some *good* things, can make us feel *bad*? This question arises because we live in a culture where we often measure the *goodness* of something by *whether or not it makes us feel good*. This is why *repentance is paradoxical*. *It is a good thing*. But, *it can make us feel bad*, even if we feel better afterwards. Well, *how can something that makes you feel bad*, be *good* for you?
- For *who* wants to repent? Because *repentance* and *reluctance* often go together. Repentance means *acknowledging*, and then *acting on*, something we *wish* wasn't true about us, or of our actions. *Self-criticism is implicit in repentance*. Though it *can* lead to self-improvement, repentance often has a *cost* we *don't want to pay*. As a result, *acknowledging fault* is not pleasant. And, *it can diminish our self-image*, even if it later *strengthens* our self-respect.
- There are three steps to repentance: *first, recognizing* our fault; *second, acknowledging* our failure; and, *third, turning away from* our *bad* attitude or behavior. Repentance is therefore *more than admitting* a *mistake*. Even if it is difficult, *admitting mistakes* is not as serious as *taking responsibility for sin*. What distinguishes sin is how we damage relationships. For, *through sin, we hurt our fellowship with God, and we hurt our relationships with each other*. This is why repentance is so challenging. Even if admitting *mistakes* is *unpleasant*, doing so is a lot easier than *admitting I have harmed* my relationship with God and with other people.
- Our Gospel today *not only commends repentance; it also tells us why*. Even if repentance causes us to *feel* bad, Jesus points to its *goal*. He tells us that genuine repentance brings *joy* ~ joy to the angels. It's another way of saying that *our repentance brings joy to God*. I like to think this is *the infectious joy of heaven*. Except that, we seem to be so well '*inoculated*' against it! So, why isn't the joy of heaven *more infectious* in our experience?
- I think the answer follows from a *second aspect* of sin. *Sin is not only an act* ~ something we have *done, or might do*. Sin is also a *condition* ~ the condition

that disposes us to do wrong things. This condition is *reflected in* wrong acts; and *this condition causes self-deception*, especially about the wrongness of what we have done. **Sin therefore limits our readiness to bring joy to God.** We *know this*. And yet, we're not readily inclined to do something about it, nor do we have much confidence that we can.

- There are several *false alternatives to repentance*. We can be in *denial* ~ denial about ourselves and our behavior. We then direct our gaze *elsewhere*, and become absorbed with other concerns. *Or* we may be willing to address *our problems*, but then we *minimize* them ~ we minimize them by saying they're *just psychological*. Therefore, we think we can simply address them through *self-help*, and by applying various *techniques*. *Another alternative* is to *rationalize* ~ we rationalize *bothersome things* we might otherwise repent of, and convince ourselves *they're not really problems at all*. *In these three ways*, we keep ourselves from bringing joy to heaven, and from experiencing how that joy might be infectious.
- I realize that the effects of sin I have mentioned are *not pleasant to consider*. But we must take account of them because they *impact our spiritual health*. **Repentance is the antidote to the poisoning effect of sin.** Therefore, it needs to be *part of our spiritual health care*, in a *regular* way, and *not just once a year* like a flu shot. *Repentance as a spiritual practice* needs to be an ongoing feature of how we live. *Practice may make 'perfect' when it comes to art or sports, but not in ethics and spirituality*. Yet, *spiritual practice does build proficiency, and it does shape character*. So, *let's agree that* repentance is an important feature of healthy spiritual practice. *Through repentance*, we bring joy to heaven, and peace to our souls.
- Here is another deception we allow ourselves to entertain: we *might* accept the idea that repentance brings joy to heaven. *But, we can doubt that we, ourselves, have really repented, especially if we don't immediately feel that joy*. When we question the sincerity of our own repentance, we begin to doubt that God has really forgiven us. **We then make God's objective acts of mercy**

contingent on our subjective evaluation of them. Here, a bit of old-fashioned spiritual advice can help. Imagine the situation: Someone tells her spiritual guide that she is *not sure about the sincerity* of her repentance. And *her spiritual guide then wisely suggests that she repent about being insufficiently repentant!* This is why regular confession *together*, in public, is a mainstay of our liturgy ~ *especially when we are intentional* as we speak the words. For *it helps us to admit together how we function most of the time*: “Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you, in thought, word and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone... We are truly sorry and we humbly repent... [H]ave mercy on us and forgive us; *that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways...*”¹

- With regard to this point, we should notice the interrelationship between how we observe **Lent**, and how we celebrate **Eastertide**. Our Lenten services have a pronounced emphasis upon repentance and confession. *During those 40 days of Lent*, we notice that we say the confession at the beginning of every Eucharist.² By contrast, *during the ‘Great 50 days of Easter,’* we omit public confession from our services. The reason for this overall pattern is *not that we sin more* during Lent, *or less* during Eastertide. *Instead*, in Lent, we observe a season when we emphasize our **subjective need** for **intentional acts of repentance**. Then, in Eastertide, we celebrate a season that emphasizes God’s **objective redemptive work**, through which the Spirit fully responds to our needful condition. *Both emphases are important for bringing joy to heaven.* There is *indeed* “a wideness in God’s mercy.” But *we experience God’s mercy, and perceive joy in heaven, when we are repentant.*
- The value of participating in regular acts of repentance, in the form of the Confession, is enhanced as we hear, and receive, the words of the priest: “Have mercy on you, forgive you all your sins through our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen you in all goodness, and *by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life.*”³ These words emphasize *God’s ever-healing and ever-merciful response*. The words are spoken *directly*, with *no hint* that God *might not* follow through on what is being said.

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- This is why we sing the Psalmist's words, as we did today: 'Create in us clean hearts, O God; and renew a right spirit within us!'



James Tissot, *The Lost Drachma*

Luke 15:1-10

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' **Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.**

"Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' **Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.**"

Notes

¹ BCP:360.

² By using the "Penitential Order," found on BCP:351.

³ BCP:360.