

“Disordered Loves”
Luke 13:1-9
Third Sunday in Lent

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Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

I’m going to let you in on a little preacher trick this morning.

It’s one of those things that many preachers like to do in sermons, and it doesn’t matter whether you know the preacher is doing it, because when it’s effective you’re not paying attention to the fact that the preacher is doing it.

The trick is to use a refrain.

Same words, same phrase, to say it once, come back to it later, to remember it at the end of the sermon...

For example, if I were to say the phrase, “I have a dream!”...you would know where that came from. You’d know the speaker was Martin Luther King, Jr., you’d know the date was August of 1963, you’d know the setting was the March on Washington...

And you know all that because King knew how to use a refrain.

But refrains don’t just occur in preaching, right?

They can be found in literature.

They can occur in music (“Were You There?” hymn).

And they can be found in the Bible

The Gospel writer Luke knew something about the power of a refrain.

We caught a glimpse of that refrain in our text for today.

Verse 3: “...unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”

Verse 5: “...unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

What’s the refrain?

Repent is the refrain.

If there is a word that Luke LOVES to use in his Gospel, or a scene that Luke loves to describe, it is a scene of repentance...

Do you remember at the end of his Gospel, two thieves hanging on the cross with Jesus? It's in Matthew, it's in Mark...in those Gospels, the bandits taunt Jesus, mock him, both of them do.

Luke is the ONLY Gospel in which one of those thieves says:

"...we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

He's repenting, right? In Luke, one thief is repenting.
Repent is the refrain.

Or maybe you recall a little earlier, when Jesus spots Zacchaeus in a tree.
Who was Zacchaeus?
A chief tax collector, a wealthy person through dishonorable gain.

Luke is the only Gospel to tell us about Zacchaeus.

And when Jesus calls him down, what does Zacchaeus do?
He says: "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much."

What is Zacchaeus doing?
He's repenting.
He's turning his life around.

Repent is the refrain.

There's so much more:

Chapter 17, Jesus says:

"And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive."

Chapter 5, when Jesus calls the tax collector Levi to be his disciple, and Levi gives a banquet for other tax collectors and sinners, and the Pharisees wonder why Jesus is hanging around with all the wrong kind of people...what does Luke say that Jesus said?

“I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

Luke cannot get away from this refrain.

Even after Easter, the risen Christ tells his disciples, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that ...forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name...?”

Is that what Jesus says?

No. According to Luke, Jesus says, “the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name...”

Repentance, even at Easter?

Yes...in Luke’s Easter, the answer is yes.

So, pop quiz for you this Sunday morning.

What word is so important to Luke in his Gospel?

Repent. Good!

What about you?

Is this word—“repent”—important to you?

Before you answer, let me be the first to say that I never hear the word “repent” outside the walls of a church. It’s a church word. And it kind of sounds like a NEGATIVE word.

A boring word. A depressing word.

A fire-and-brimstone kind of word.

Repent...or else!!

Be afraid, hang the head, sackcloth and ashes, that whole thing...

How many of you woke up this morning and said to yourself, “I can’t wait to get to church because I really hope I hear a sermon about REPENTING today!”

That’s about what I thought...

I wonder if we can resuscitate this word.
Repenting, after all, is more than saying that you’re sorry.

It literally means to turn around, to turn back, to go a different direction.

And it can be a powerful thing, to watch someone repent.

At this point, I probably need to mention the New York Yankees.

No...I don’t mean that I need to repent of my love for them.
Some of you were getting your hopes up that that’s what I meant...

I mention the Yankees, because I’m thinking now of the late Yankee icon,
Mickey Mantle.

Do you remember Mickey Mantle, at the end of his life?
This ballplayer who was idolized by so many boys growing up in the 50s
and 60s?

Unbeknownst to those boys who pretended they were the Mick in their
backyards, Mantle had spent his career not just knocking out homers, but knocking
down drinks.

And he spent much of his retirement that way.
And it cut his life short.

I never saw Mantle play, but I did watch him once on tv.
It was 25 years ago,
after a liver transplant,
after years of drinking had destroyed his body,

after he'd passed his alcoholism onto his sons,
and one of them died a premature death—

After all that, he held a press conference, and he said—shortly before his own death—that if he was ever going to be an example for young boys, young kids, the children, let it be this:

Don't be like me.

The great Mickey Mantle—don't be like me?
It was his finest moment.

Mickey Mantle was REPENTING...

Now some of you may think, that's all fine and good, but what about me?

After all, some in this room may not have a toxic habit that you need to break. Many in this room go their jobs, you work really hard, you take care of your family, you volunteer at your church, heck—you even tithe, giving 10% of all that you make to your church, not as an act of repentance but just because it's the faithful thing to do.

What does repenting look like for someone like you?
Good question. Let me get at it this way...

During an interview that he gave a couple years ago, the columnist David Brooks spoke about the challenge in today's society of keeping words like "sin" in the public square.

He described the experience of writing his book, *The Road to Character*, and how an editor in New York that said, "I love the way you were talking about your book, but I didn't like the way you used that word 'sin.' It's a downer. Use the word 'insensitive' instead."

"You really can't talk about 'original sin,'" he goes on to say. "People will just push you away. And so I go to Augustine's concept of 'disordered loves'

which is we all love a lot of things, and we all know some loves are higher than others.

“Our love of truth should be higher than our love of money, but because of some [mess]-up in our nature, we get our loves out of order all the time. So if a friend blabs to you a secret and you tell it at a dinner party, you’re putting your love of popularity above your love of friendship, and that’s a sin.

“And...in this world, which doesn’t like to peer darkly into brokenness, it’s easier to swallow the concept of two positive things that are out of order.”¹

I LIKE that old Augustine of Hippo definition because it helps us put REPENTING in a new light.

It means that repentance is not ONLY about living an awful, chaotic life and then stopping our bad behavior.

Repentance is also about PUTTING OUR LOVES in the right order.

What if you thought of it that way?

What would happen if you went home today and took a good look at all the loves in your life...your love for your children, for your family...and your love of possessions, or your love of being right...and you asked yourself: “Are these in the right order?”

A number of years ago, an article appeared in which a woman named Janice Wilberg wrote about her relationship with her parents. Her family was the type that did the “silent treatment” when they were mad at each other...

On one occasion that silence lasted 12 years.

From 1988-2000, Janice did not speak with her parents. Their only communication was a Christmas card.

¹ From an interview with Krista Tippet, in her podcast “On Being,” October 20, 2016. A transcript can be found at <http://www.onbeing.org/program/david-brooks-and-ej-dionne-sinfulness-hopefulness-and-the-possibility-of-politics/transcript>.

One year, a different card arrived in the mail.
 It was from her father.
 And it contained three simple words: "I'm so sorry."

It broke the tension. Letters started to go back and forth, until a year later Wilberg took her family to see her parents again. A few months later, her mom died, and a year and ½ later, her father died.

But Wilberg was grateful for the time she got to spend with her folks at the end of their lives.

"My father's three words saved me from being an orphan," she writes. "Maybe there are other members of the grudge-holding culture who might listen to my story and make the move. It's not too late."²

What did Janice Wilberg and her family do?

They repented...they put their love of being RIGHT, the ways that they loved to nurse old wounds...they put those loves down here. And they put their love of ONE ANOTHER...up here.

They put their loves in the right order.

All of which makes repentance...not a dreary word.
 Not a discouraging word.
 But a very HOPEFUL word.

Because according to Jesus, there is still time.

The owner of the vineyard wants to cut the fig tree down.
 But the gardener says, Give it another year:

"If it bears fruit, well and good;
 but if not, you can cut it down."

² Janice Wilberg, "The Power of Saying You're Sorry," in *Newsweek*, September 5, 2008.

According to Jesus, we have a window of time...to get our loves in order.
 To fix what we know needs fixing.
 To mend what we know needs mending.

I think Jesus would describe repenting...not as something we HAVE to do...but as an OPPORTUNITY.

Something we still have a chance to do.

That's not how you and I usually think of opportunities, right?
 An opportunity to...repent??!!

For example, how many of you wish you had invested in Starbucks...back in 1992?

In 1992, there were 165 Starbucks stores.
 Today, there are well over 20,000 Starbucks stores.

In 1992, if you had invested \$1000 in Starbucks...that investment today would be worth \$224,777.³

Not a bad opportunity, right?
 Lots of people missed that opportunity, because they didn't know a thing about Starbucks.

But I'm not sure Jesus would say that's the biggest opportunity you and I have missed. I think...any time we fail to repent...Jesus would say, that's the biggest opportunity you and I have missed.

I recall back in seminary, I did a unit of CPE—that's Clinical Pastoral Education. It meant spending a summer as a hospital chaplain with other student

³ This information comes from two websites: <https://www.starbucks.com/about-us/company-information/starbucks-company-timeline>, and <https://www.investopedia.com/articles/markets/120215/if-you-had-invested-right-after-starbucks-ipo.asp>.

chaplains. Some of us were white. Some were black. Some were older, some were younger. Some were Jewish, studying to become rabbis. There were about 8 in all, a good mix.

Now the purpose of CPE is to evaluate what baggage you bring to ministry. To get it out in the open, and deal with it.

Conversations one has with hospital patients are analyzed line by line by your supervisor, by your peers...it can be grueling stuff.

But in the end, it was a very helpful summer for me.

I recall at the end of the summer, during one of our last sessions together, all eight of us student chaplains went around the room. We named gifts we saw in each other, and we were also allowed to name a barrier we saw in someone else—a blind spot, if you will, that could harm a person's ministry down the road.

We went around the room, and finally it was my turn to be evaluated.

And one of the student chaplains in the group was an older African-American lady.

Her name was Ginger.

I liked Ginger.

She had a good smile.

A good sense of humor.

I had always felt like I had a good relationship with Ginger.

And when it was Ginger's turn to evaluate me, Ginger said: "Ben, I think one of your issues is that you've got some underlying prejudice—some underlying racial prejudice."

And she left it at that.

No examples. No specifics.

I was asked by the supervisor if I wanted to respond.

And I was so stunned, I smiled and said no.

But inside, in my mind, I was responding.

I was responding A LOT!!

I mean, I was MAD!!

Where did she get off telling me I was prejudiced?

What in the world was that all about?
That was a cheap shot...a hit and run.

I never spoke to Ginger after that comment.
Never said one more word to her.
I figured if I didn't have anything nice to say to her, don't say anything at all...that's the Christian thing to do.

Was that the Christian thing to do?
To engage in a monologue with myself about how right I was and how Ginger was wrong?

Or should I have tried to have a conversation with her?
Should I have repented of my anger toward her,
and tried to listen for whether God had something
to say to me through Ginger?

Gosh, it's been well over 20 years since it happened.
That opportunity for conversation,
and authentic relationship,
and new fruit...it's long gone.

The good news today is that all is not gone.
According to Jesus, there is still time to put our loves in the right order.

In fact, you could put it on your list of things to do today.
In front of going to the grocery store, even above taking that nap you love to take on Sunday afternoons...you really could put "repent".

Repenting...number one on your list and my list to do today.

Now...one more thing.
If the Gospel writer Luke were here, he would agree that it's a good idea to repent today.

And then Luke would say, "Ben, don't just repent today. Get your loves in the right order every day."

Luke would say, "Make it a refrain."

Amen.