

"Re"-Birth Sermon Series, #2
"Re'-pent"
Sunday, February 26, 2023
1st Sunday of Lent

In April of 2016, the University of North Dakota Hockey team won the national championship after a prolonged drought in achieving that goal. Grand Forks loves their Fighting Hawks/Sioux and in the city the downtown broke out into a huge party. Naomi Danielson was happy for the hockey team and their fans, until "some misguided revelers" tipped her Toyota Prius on its side. She wasn't happy when the police showed up at her door investigating the event, and when the car was towed away to a body shop for expensive repairs.

What does repentance look like in this situation? An anonymous person set up a "Go-Fund Me" account in her name to raise money to cover the cost of the repairs. That sounds like repentance, doesn't it? Especially if the person who started the account was one of the car-tippers and coughed up some of his/her own money to help out.

What commandment was broken when the misguided revelers tipped over the car? "Love neighbor as yourself." (Mark 12:31)

Has anyone here tipped over any cars lately???

What kind of sins are we more likely to commit?

In the Isaiah passage God revealed several ways Israel has harmed their relationship with him:

- Giving lip service
- Judging, criticizing, and mocking people
- being insensitive towards oppressed people
- being greedy and stingy towards the poor
- not honoring the Sabbath

Do any of these strike a cord for any of you? Maybe not today, but perhaps at another time?

What does repentance look like in each of these situations?

Don't answer that just yet! Instead, let's consider what the cost may be to repent...

There is one very important cost that all of these have in common. Repenting from any one of these will cost you social standing with your crowd. There is a huge and often uncounted for cost when we break from our peer groups. In some ways we are "rejecting" their group thought and customs, so they may feel hurt by this, and so we don't want to give that impression. Being able to stand against peer pressure and navigate the waters of life is something only the Holy Spirit can help us do. A recovering addict's community is a group who is not going to support them in their becoming free from the addiction. The recovering addict needs to have a new set of friends to encourage and support this. There was a time in military life when it was common for the soldiers and airmen to get drunk and indulge in pornography. As women became involved in leadership, though, the culture changed. Those behaviors were rejected. So there can be good changes brought about when a group of people take notice, make a stand, and repent. Peer pressure, social groups reveal an external cost.

But a couple of the sins that Isaiah highlights may involved internal "costs." Those may include the folks who are greedy and end up being stingy towards the poor and those who are critical and judgmental.

What about a person whose sense of security is extremely tied to the size of their bank accounts and 401K's? Their greedy and stingy ways are hurting their relationships with not only the Lord God, but more than likely their family and neighbors.

Do you know anyone who is really critical and judgmental? Do they tear people down in a comparison sort of way, to build themselves up? For this person to repent of this behavior involves more than keeping their mouth shut. It really requires a major heart and soul transplant or transformation, doesn't it?

Actually, for anyone who has fallen into these kinds of ruts, they are all going to need heart and soul transplants or transformations, aren't they?

Bill Donahue describes a penitent spirit this way:

“Godly sorrow grieves the heart, alienates us from God and causes a desire to come home, to return. It loves reconciliation, justice and transformation of character.

Worldly sorrow expresses sadness over events, but makes no determination to pursue internal, lasting changes. Thus it results in death—spiritual, emotional, and even physical.

Worldly sorrow produces a change in demeanor; godly sorrow produces a change in destination.” (The Hope of Easter, p. 25-26)

Thankfully we have a Lord and Savior who is gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, and wants to give us every opportunity to nurture our relationship with him. So repentance is something we can do and count on transforming our souls and spirits.

Still, we will have to deal with those other challenges and social losses don't we? Paul describes some challenging situations to the church in Corinth, didn't he? Followers of Jesus experienced being *“hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.”* (2Corinthians 4:8-9)

How was it possible that Jesus' followers would be able to experience all this and not be defeated? Who is giving them the power to put up with all of these challenges, but not lose their faith?

The Lord God, right? The Holy Spirit is the one who empowers Jesus' followers to repent and endure the hardships that will come along with this.

The internal transformation that takes place when we repent is following some of Jesus' core teachings. He said in all four gospels that his disciples are to deny themselves, pick up their cross, and follow him. We can expect to lose our life, in order to gain our life. (Matthew 16:24-27; Mark 8:34-38; Luke 9:23-26; John 12:23-26)

Something inside us must die in order for repentance to be true. That death involves our self-centered, self-serving ways. When we ask for the Holy Spirit's help to repent, he will help us identify the selfishness hidden in the hurt and as we repent, he will bless us with new life, something better from his

Spirit—like peace, love, joy, generosity, faithfulness, kindness, patience...you get the idea. Choice by choice, day by day, our decisions add up and we become “new people,” transformed people.

JD Walt, Sower-in-chief, at Seedbed gives us some wise advice that I will share with you in conclusion. He doesn't believe God is interested in “behavior modification.” Behavior modification is actually very legalistic in its approach to loving one another and the Lord. JD emphasizes the truth that God wants all of our being: heart, soul, mind, and body. When we truly repent we give him access to all of our being. JD advises Jesus' disciples to run boldly “toward Jesus. The gravity of the crowd is strong. It will take an escape velocity fueled by the Holy Spirit to break free...What might it look like to quietly leave the crowd and find a ‘closer walk’ with Jesus?” (Daily Text, Flip Repentance, March 16, 2019)

Whoever created that “Go Fund Me” account for Naomi Danielson as an act of repentance led to another element of “Re”-Birth. Naomi's faith in her community was restored. She wrote in a thank you note which appeared in the Grand Forks Herald, “I was blown away to learn somebody I didn't know had set up a GoFundMe page to help defray the repair costs. My thanks to the generous, caring people of Grand Forks and elsewhere for helping me. It warms my heart that people did this for me. Thank you so much.” (Grand Forks Herald, “Much Obligated: Owner: Thanks for help in righting tipped vehicle” April 24, 2016)

So as a recap: we surrender our lives over to the Lord to experience rebirth. When we do this, we can expect that the Holy Spirit will help us “re”cognize our sin. Once we are aware of it, we are given the opportunity to “re”pent. When we repent, we will reap a variety of character qualities and faith experiences like restoring our faith in humankind. Let us remember that God does this because he loves us all and wants what's best for all of us, on both a personal level and a community level.

It is my prayer that this message will encourage you to repent when you discover a harm you've done to another person or committed some sin or unjust act that harms society.