Sunday, January 13, 1985
TO SAY "I'M SORRY" IS NOT ENOUGH
Mark 1:4-11

We've all driven along highways and have seen signs that say in large letters, "REPENT." Or perhaps we've been handed religious pamphlets which carry the same short message, and we've wondered what we were being asked to do.

In the scripture reading this morning from Mark's gospel, we are given a brief summary of the message of John the Baptist, and it contains the word-"Repentance!" "John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

A little later in Mark's gospel, it is reported that Jesus preached a similar message: "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel."

What does it mean to "Repent" from a Christian point of view?

1. First of all, repentance as it is here used by John the Baptist and then by Jesus, means much more than saying, "I'm sorry for the wrongs I've committed."

John the Baptist was asking people to turn their lives around; to start out in a new direction; to change their ways so that they would be ready for God to enter their lives in a new and fresh way. And Jesus Christ was asking for the same change!

Too often, we've thought of repentance only in terms of being sorry for our sins and we've defined sin in too narrow a way. Recently, I was talking with a colleague, a Roman Catholic priest, and he said to me, "Have you ever wondered what it is like to hear confessions hour after hour, week after week, sitting in a small booth with a partition between you and the person confessing?" Then he went on to say, "It's like being stoned to death with popcorn. Most of the confessions I hear are so utterly trivial, so downright silly that they bore me to death."

A writer who had been brought up within the Roman Catholic tradition confirmed what the priest said. She was convent educated and the kind of sins she and her schoolmates confessed were frequently minor. One of them had taken communion, which by the rules of the church had to be taken after fasting — but she had taken communion after accidentally swallowing a drop of water while brushing her teeth, and so she confessed her sin.

However, those of us outside the Roman Catholic tradition often make the same mistake — we define sin too narrowly and too personally and thus trivialize it. Worse still, we confess our petty wrong-doings and then call that repentance.

The real danger is that in doing this we fail to recognize or we cover up the subtle and hidden sins, and worse still they are not even thought of as sins. And that's exactly what John the Baptist and Jesus were both trying to point out in their preaching to the religious people of their time.

Some years ago, Dr. Karl Menninger wrote a book entitled, "Whatever Became of Sin." In this book, he has a chapter entitled, "Sin as Collective Irresponsibility," and he lists such sins as

our continued rape of the environment, our unwillingness to regulate and control the sale of handguns and more.

We have been so used to taking only a narrow personal definition of sin and repentance, that we have as Jesus put it, “Neglected the weightier matters of justice.” This is not to say that there are no personal sins; there are many which are serious. But any true repentance needs to see sin and wrong-doing in its large categories as well as the small.

All ministers have had the experience of having a person apologize for swearing or saying a dirty word in their presence. It’s a kind of confession of personal sin. Yet I often think that it that’s the worst sin that a person has committed, he or she is quite good.

I remember one particular instance of a person apologizing for swearing in my presence. He had suddenly let slip a familiar four-letter word. Yet after that, throughout the rest of the evening, his entire conversation had been foul and ugly in other ways that he did not even recognize and thus did not repent of. He showed his deep hatred of certain persons who were of a different skin color and others of a different ethnic background. He was vile with bitter contempt for half the human race. Yet he had no idea of anything being wrong. He simply felt that in the presence of a minister to use a bad word was his only fault.

We so often get things mixed up. A southern preacher recalled recently that in the little church where he grew up, it was considered a sin to wear a tie, but it was all right to participate in and attend a lynching.

So, repentance is much more than saying, “I’m sorry,” for the petty sins we all commit. Too often with this kind of repentance, we do penance, but do not make any basic change in our life. We are sorry, but return to our old ways.

Here are some definitions of sin which are helpful. Sin is any action of thought which injures creation and does harm to its balance and harmony, turning what is beautiful and created by God as good, into something ugly. Sin is also anything which blocks us from fulfilling our potential and from becoming what God meant us to be. Sin is being out of harmony with God, with others and with God’s creation. Sin is going the wrong direction in life. It is worshipping false gods. It is having the wrong priorities!

True repentance involves our willingness to rigorously examine our life and to not be afraid to admit our deepest fears and disappointments as well as our sin. I remember a person saying to me some years ago, “Look I have never told this to anyone; but I’ve been unhappy most of my life in my present job; and my marriage is not what it should be.” After that confession and some more conversation, the person was able to being to make some basic changes in his life. But until he admitted what was wrong, it was impossible to change.

On the other hand, we need to be careful, lest we confuse repentance with resignation. We often say, “I am not very happy. I am not content with the way my life is going. I am not really joyful or peaceful, but just don’t know how things can be any different, and I guess I have to be realistic and accept my life as it is.” It is this mood of resignation that can prevent us from actively searching for the life of the Spirit. It can keep us from repentance.

So, our first task is to dispel this vague, murky feeling of discontent and to look critically at how we are living our lives. This requires honesty, courage and trust. We must honestly unmask and courageously confront our many self-deceptive games.

When we being to do this, we make room for God's Spirit to enter our lives and we are on the way to becoming a new person. We have begun true repentance — the process of turning our life around and starting in a new direction.

2. A second part of repentance is being able to let go. We cannot truly start in a new direction without letting go of the past and of our addictions in the past.

Matthew Fox puts it this way in his book, "Original Blessing," "Whether our addictions are to Atari games or to making more money, to shopping, or to bigger and bigger TV sets, to attending workshops or to alcohol or to drugs, to our anger at our parents or others, our spirit wants to be set free. It wants to let go. Letting go is so essential when we learn to realize that it is not letting go of things that is important, but the letting go of attitudes toward things."

Just as letting go is an important part of repentance, so is forgiveness an important part of letting go. We are saved by forgiveness, the power to forgive ourselves, to allow ourselves to be forgiven, which matures into the power to forgive others and allow them their time to be forgiven. Forgiveness is about letting go of guilt — some imagined, some real — and about letting go of fear. There is no healing, no salvation, without forgiveness. And with forgiveness all things become saved and healed once again. Creation is restored.

3. Thirdly, in addition to letting go, emptying oneself, repentance also means inviting God's Spirit to become a large part of your life. It means opening yourself to the love and goodness of God. Repentance is turning one's life over to God and being as open as possible to receiving God's Spirit and God's love into our lives. When we have truly let go, we have then made room for God's Spirit. Some people are so filled already with other things that there is no room. As Nouwen says, "They are filled, yet unfilled."

As our trust in God grows, we will find that there is more and more space in our lives for God.

When we repent in this way and put our trust in God, then we are saved by God's love and grace. In the New Testament, the word for being saved, "Salvation" means health, wholeness, being in harmony with God and with God's creation.

The point is that being saved, "Salvation," is something that happens here and now. Too often in the past, some Christians have interpreted being saved in too narrow a way - of gaining life after death, or of being saved from some individual sin. It includes that, but also includes much more.

Now some of you here today, or listening on the radio, may be asking - how does it all happen? How can I begin?

It begins very simply by you saying to God today in this worship service, perhaps in the time of silent prayer — "Here I am, God. I accept and believe the fact that you accept and love me just as I am. I want to turn my life around and I am going to begin doing it today, and I need your help. I know that I don't have to wait until my life is completely straightened our before I can experience your love and power. I am going to begin this day by putting my trust in you, by turning my life over to you and I am going to be as open as possible to receiving your Spirit and your love into my life. I am going to leave my past mistakes and sins behind me. I know that you have forgiven me because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I am going to forgive others in the same manner."

And after you've made this basic commitment, don't stop. Our spiritual natures need constant cultivation and attention. Jesus knew the importance of this. This is why he taught his disciples to pray and why he had a regular discipline of prayer, worship and devotion.

This is essential to our growing and maturing as Christians. Christians often like to talk of being "Born Again," but then mistakenly think they can stop there. Think of what would happen in a physical sense if we were just born and then stopped growing and learning. We wouldn't learn to walk, or talk, or think, or make decisions. Who would want to stay in the baby stage all of life? We are to grow in wisdom and in stature. We are to grow physically and spiritually. I invite you to being today. Amen.