Sunday, February 17, 1991
REPENT: A MISUNDERSTOOD WORD
Mark 1:9-15

According to the New Testament, when he was about 30 years old, Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. Afterward, he was sure that God had called him for a special purpose. Jesus then went away on a spiritual retreat to begin sorting out what God wanted him to do with the rest of his life. During that retreat in the wilderness, he faced some of his first and most severe temptations as he wrestled with how he could best carry out God's will. After overcoming these temptations, Jesus began his public ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing. The Gospel of Mark sums up the basic theme of Jesus' preaching in one sentence: "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'"

What did Jesus mean when he asked his listeners to "repent?" It's so easy to misunderstand the Bible. A little girl came home from Sunday School where she had learned that people were created from the dust of the earth and returned to dust after death. While playing in her room that afternoon, she looked under her bed and saw a ball of dust. Running downstairs to her parents, she excitedly announced, "Mom, Dad, come quick. There's someone under my bed, but I can't tell if they're coming or going."

A little boy learned in Sunday School how God took the rib of Adam to create Eve. He had been running and developed a side-ache. Frightened, he ran to his mother and cried out, "Mom, I think I'm going to have a wife."

Many people, when they hear the word "repent," misunderstand the word because they think it only means being sorry for one's sins and mistakes. They might even have a picture in their minds of people coming forward in a religious revival service to publicly repent of their sins. And because some people are sorry to have to leave their sins behind, they do not think of repentance as being a joyful event.

In other words, most people tend to think of repenting as changing from an immoral person to a moral one. This is one of the meanings of the word "repent." But when Jesus used the word, he meant much more than that. In the Greek language, which is the language of the New Testament in its first written form, the word for "repent" means to turn, to proceed in a new direction, to change one's whole perspective on life, to make a totally new beginning, to call into question all of one's old assumptions. It means being willing to see God, other people, and all of creation in a new way. And that further means leaving behind some of our old beliefs, our old ways of seeing and understanding things. In other parts of the New Testament, Jesus uses the metaphor of being healed of blindness for repentance. It was Jesus' way of saying that you can't see the reign of God at work in the world unless you are willing to drop some of your old preconceptions and see and understand God in a fresh way. Jesus knew that his listeners would not be able to believe in the good news that he was bringing them unless they were, at the same time, open to seeing God in a new way. That's why he asked them "to repent" so they could hear and understand the good news.

Jesus knew that how we see God, the world, creation, people, events, all that happens, and how we act and behave depends to a large degree on our view of the world, our perception, our awareness. We see what we believe. If, for example, we believe that all people, except our own kind, are our enemies, we will see them that way, and furthermore, we will act toward

them in that way, and they may very well begin to act that way in relationship to us. A simple way of saying this is: “If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to treat everything as if it were a nail.”

Let me explain this further with the word “paradigm.” A paradigm is a model or a pattern. It is a commonly held set of assumptions. It’s like a filter through which we see the world. Each one of us sees people, events, the world around us through some kind of paradigm. The paradigm or pattern explains the world to us and helps us predict its behavior and our own behavior.

Here are some examples. A famous historical paradigm was the view at one time held by nearly everyone that the earth is the center of the universe. All other planets, including the sun, it was believed, revolve around the earth. That, of course, makes the earth the center of the universe, the center of all of God’s creation. All else revolves around it, for as any fool can plainly see, the sun comes up in the east, moves overhead, and sets in the west, and the stars move around the earth in predictable courses. That paradigm, in its day, explained the world better than any other view. An earlier paradigm saw the world as being flat.

By the 16th century, however, some advanced astronomers were saying that this paradigm, this idea of how the universe is organized, had too many discrepancies. So people like Copernicus began to look for a better way to explain the universe — a new paradigm. The earth, said Copernicus, moves around the sun, as do many other planets. The earth is not the center of the universe. Maybe it is not as special as people thought it to be.

But paradigms do not change easily. That’s why repentance is difficult. We do not like to give up our usual way of understanding things. We do not like to admit that we were wrong. The establishment, including the church of that time, said that Copernicus was wrong. The establishment has a lot invested in the old paradigm. That’s why they are difficult to change. In fact, those who propose new ones are often persecuted and killed. They are considered revolutionaries and very dangerous. Jesus is an example. He said God loves the whole world, not only the chosen people of one religion. He said that we are to love our enemies, whereas the old paradigm said that we are to hate our enemies. Over and over again, we hear Jesus say, “You have heard that it was said ... but I say to you.”

The early church, following the teachings of Jesus, embraced these new paradigms. There is one human race, the church said; we are all children of God, and God loves every one of us. Jews and Greeks, male and female, slave and free, are all equal in God’s eyes. It was the new paradigm: one humanity. When the Apostle Paul began to preach this good news, he frequently got thrown out of town by the religious people of his time. To believe this good news, one had to repent, to turn and go in another direction, to be willing to see God and the world in a new way and leave the old way behind.

But why do we have so much difficulty repenting and leaving our old ways and ideas behind? Someone said, “The human mind likes a strange idea as little as the body likes a strange protein and resists it with a similar energy.”

A psychologist named Edward De Bono has studied how the mind forms and resists new ideas. He compares the process of thinking to digging holes and uses this example: “It is not possible to dig a hole in a different place by digging the same hole deeper. Logic is the tool that is used to dig deeper holes. But if a hole is in the wrong place, then no amount of digging it deeper is going to put it in the right place. No matter how obvious this may seem to every

digger, it is still easier to go on digging in the same hole than to start all over again in a new place."

This disinclination to abandon a half-dug hole (which is like questioning an old assumption) is partly a reluctance to abandon the investment of effort that has gone into the hole without seeing some return. It is also easier to go on doing the same thing rather than being creative and finding a new way of doing something.

In a similar way, it is not possible to look in a different direction by looking harder in the same direction. No sooner are two thoughts strung together than there is a direction, and it becomes easier to string further thoughts along in the same direction than to ignore it or question whether it's the right direction in the first place. Even when we're going in the wrong direction, most of us know how difficult it is for us to finally admit it and turn around and go in another direction. Someone once said, "Nothing is more dangerous than an idea when it is the only one you have." Someone else said, "The art of becoming wise is the art of knowing what to overlook."

Thus, even in many fields of science, by far the greatest amount of scientific effort is directed toward the logical enlargement of some accepted hole — yet startling new ideas and huge scientific advances have frequently come about through people ignoring the hole that is in progress and starting a new one.

One of the most effective medical discoveries of all time came about when Edward Jenner shifted his attention from why people got smallpox to why dairymaids apparently did not. From the discovery that harmless cowpox gave protection against deadly smallpox came vaccination and the end of smallpox as a scourge in the Western world.

Have you also noticed that sometimes it's easy to come up with new ideas? The hard part is letting go of what worked for you two years ago but will soon be out of date. Having a big success with one set of assumptions can easily create a dogmatic outlook. Thomas Edison founded the electricity supply industry using direct current (DC). This prevented him from seeing both the benefits of alternating current (AC) and that the future of the industry lay with that type of current.

So when Jesus calls us to repent, he is asking us to do a lot more than only be sorry for our sins. He is inviting us to look at God and all of God's creation in new ways — to be open to fresh ideas and not get caught up in rigid dogma. Dogma can come from an outside authority or it can be self-generated from one's past successes. None other than Plato himself dictated that the circle was the perfect form for celestial movement, and for the next two thousand years, astronomers said that planetary orbits were circular — even though their observations didn't quite jibe with that. Even Copernicus used circles in his heliocentric model of the universe. Only after much soul-searching did Kepler use the ellipse to describe the heavenly paths. It's no wonder that repentance is such a persistent theme in the preaching of Jesus and the early church. And no matter what some Christian evangelists say, repentance is a repeat performance. It's something that needs to be done over and over again because we keep falling back into our old ways.

Repent: only then, according to Jesus, can you begin to believe the good news. Only then can you begin to experience God's unconditional forgiving love for you and for all people. This new understanding of God is radically different than our usual one.

Nothing could illustrate this more than Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. First, here's how we would tell the story, and then notice how Jesus told it.

A young man asked his dad for his part of the estate. He's tired of living at home. The dad gives him his part, and the son goes into another country and very quickly squanders all the money. He wakes up one morning in a pigsty and says to himself, "I was better off in my father's house." I will arise and go to my father and repent. I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." And so he began the journey home. It's not easy to admit your whole life has been going in the wrong direction. When the son was still a distance from home, his father saw him and remembered that his son had wasted his inheritance and had forsaken the family. And so his father sat and waited until his son arrived at the front door. And when the son knocked on the door, the father waited a long time before he answered the door.

And when the son made his confession and asked to be accepted back as one of the servants, the father said, "Oh, is it you? I will invite you in and we will have a long, long talk. And I might take you back. There will be rules and regulations. You will be grounded for two months, and after that, you must be in by 10:00 o'clock each night. And once you have proved yourself to me, maybe after five years, you can once again be a part of the family."

But that's not the story as Jesus told it. Luke says, "When the son was still far in the distance, the father saw him and was filled with compassion. The father ran to meet the son and put his arms around him and kissed him." Do you hear that? The father ran to him. And there was great rejoicing. A big party was held. Do you see how Jesus describes God in his version of the story? Which do you prefer?

Repentance is a joyful event. It brings joy to God and to us. Repentance is good news. When we are open to new ideas and new ways of seeing God and the world, life takes on new meaning. We no longer need to stay in our old ruts. We can leave our sins, our mistakes, and failures behind. Amen.