Sunday, February 16, 1997
WHAT IT MEANS TO REPENT
Mark 1:9-15

According to the New Testament, when Jesus was about 30 years old, he was baptized in the River Jordan by John the Baptist. Following his baptism, Jesus went on a spiritual retreat, a kind of holding pattern, in order to begin to figure out what God wanted him to do in his ministry. As I said in a previous sermon, he unpacked and repacked his bags for the continuation of his life's journey.

During this retreat in the wilderness, he faced and overcame several strong temptations as he wrestled with how he could best carry out God's will. Then Jesus began his public ministry of teaching and healing. The Gospel of Mark sums up the central theme of Jesus' message 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 invited his listeners to "repent?" It's 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!"

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

We make a mistake if we define "repenting" primarily as changing from an immoral person to a moral one. That is one of the meanings of the word, but when Jesus used the word "repent," he meant much more than that.

In the Greek language, which is the language of the New Testament in its original 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 new beginning, to be willing 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 you sometimes have to leave behind some of your old beliefs, some of your old ways of seeing and understanding God and the world. In other parts of the New Testament, Jesus used the metaphor of being healed of blindness to describe repentance. It was his 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. In other words, you need to "repent."

Here's another way of describing it. How you understand the world, God, and other people — and how you behave — depends to a large degree on what you believe. If, for example, you

believe that all people except those of your own kind are your enemies, you will see them that way, and you will act toward them in that way. They may very well begin to act that way in relationship to you. As someone said, “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 pattern. It is a commonly held set of assumptions, like a filter through which we see the world. Each of us sees people, events, and the world around us through one or more paradigms. The paradigm explains the world to us and helps us predict its behavior and our own.

Here’s an example I’ve used in other sermons. One of the most famous historical paradigms was the view held by nearly everyone that the earth was the center of the universe. All other planets, including the sun, it was believed, revolved around the earth. That paradigm made the earth the center of the universe, the center of all of God’s creation. All else revolved around it, for as any fool could 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. In its day, with the available technology, that paradigm explained the universe better than any other view. An earlier paradigm saw the world as being flat.

By the 15th and 16th centuries, astronomers like Copernicus and later Galileo said that this paradigm — this understanding of how the universe is organized — had too many discrepancies. So they began to look for a better way to explain the universe, a new paradigm. The earth, they said, moves around the sun, as do the other planets. The earth is not the center of the universe. 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 we were wrong. The establishment, including the church of that time, said that Copernicus and Galileo were wrong. The establishment always has a lot invested in the old paradigm. That’s why paradigms are so difficult to change. Those who propose new ones are often persecuted and killed. They are considered revolutionaries and dangerous.

Jesus is an example. He said God loves the whole world, not only the chosen people of one kind. He said we are to love our enemies, whereas the old paradigm said we are to hate our enemies. Over and over again, we hear Jesus say, “You have heard that it was said of old, but I say to you…”

The early church, following the teachings of Jesus, accepted these new paradigms. There is one human race, the church said. We are all children of God, and God loves every one of us equally — Jews, Greeks, Samaritans, Romans, women, men, slaves — all are equal in God’s love. It was the new paradigm: one humanity. There are those who still have trouble with that paradigm today.

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 accept 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 different way and leave the old way behind.

But why do we have so much difficulty repenting and leaving our old ways, ideas, and beliefs behind?

A psychologist named Edward DeBono 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 might 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 reluctance 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. Once you have two thoughts strung together, you have begun to establish 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 begin to suspect we're going in the wrong direction, most of us know how difficult it is for us to finally admit it and turn around.

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."

Even in some fields of science, by far the greatest amount of scientific effort is often 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 the scourge of the Western world.

You've also probably 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 that industry was with that type of current.

So when Jesus calls us to repent, he is asking us to do a lot more than be sorry for our sins. He is asking 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 match 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 repentance of this kind is 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 and experience of God is radically different from 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 was tired of living at home. The dad gave him his share, and the son went into another country and very quickly squandered all the money. He woke up one morning in a pig pen and said to himself, "I was better off in my father's home. I will go to my father and repent. I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned. I am not worthy to be called your son. Treat me as 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 forsaken the family. And so his father sat and waited until his son arrived at the front door. When the son knocked, the father waited a long time before he opened it.

When the son made his confession and asked to be accepted as one of the servants, the father said, "I'm surprised you returned. Come in, and we'll have a talk. Maybe I'll take you back and maybe not. If I do, there will be certain rules and regulations. You will be grounded for two months, and after that you must be in by 9:00 each night. And once you have proved yourself to me, maybe after five years, you can once again be 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 his son, 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, our version or his? Amen.