Sunday, March 12, 2000
REPENT AND BELIEVE IN THE GOOD NEWS
Mark 1:9-15

According to the gospel stories, a recurring theme in the message that Jesus proclaimed was, "Repent and believe in the good news." In today's story from the gospel of Mark, following his baptism and his temptations in the wilderness, Mark states, "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 was Jesus asking people to do when he called upon them to repent? It's easy to think of "repent" in a very narrow way, and it's also easy to misunderstand the Bible.

A little boy opened the big and old family Bible with fascination, looking at the old pages as he turned them. Then something fell out of the Bible, and he picked it up and looked at it closely. It was an old leaf from a tree that had been pressed between the pages. "Mom, look what I found," the boy called out. "What have you got there, son?" his mother asked. With astonishment in his voice, the boy answered, "It's Adam's suit."

A four-year-old prayed the Lord's Prayer this way: "Forgive us our trash baskets as we forgive those who put trash in our trash baskets."

Many people hear the word "repent" and think it only means being sorry for one's sins, and they define sin in very narrow terms. You might even picture people coming forward in a religious revival to publicly acknowledge and repent of their sins, and that can be one very important kind of repentance. But because some people are sorry to leave their sins behind, they don't necessarily think of repentance as a joyful occasion. If that's the case, it's not true repentance.

The main point I want to make in today's sermon is that to repent means more than changing from an immoral person to a moral one. When Jesus used the word "repent," he was using it in a broader way.

In the Greek language, which is the language in which the New Testament first appeared in written form, the Greek word for repent means to turn, to proceed in a new direction, to change one's perspective on life, to make a new beginning, to be willing to call into question some of your basic assumptions.

When Jesus called on people to repent, he was asking them to be willing to see God, other people, and all of creation in a different way. It is to admit that none of us ever knows all there is to know about God. It is to be open to God's ongoing revelation. To do that 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 places in the New Testament, Jesus used the metaphor of being healed of blindness for repentance. It was his way of saying that you can't see the workings of God 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 treat them that way, and they may very well begin to act that way in relationship to you. Your belief and your actions will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

One of the most fascinating books I've read recently is titled Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea, by Charles Seife. He has researched and presents the history of the concept of "zero." According to him, the Babylonians invented zero, the Greeks banned it, the Hindus worshiped it, and the early Christian Church used it to fend off heretics. It's the story of people who battled over the meaning of this mysterious number and debated whether or not zero can even be called a number.

Seife points out that zero is powerful because it is infinity's twin. They are equal and opposite, paradoxical and troubling. The biggest questions in science and religion are about nothingness and eternity, the void and the infinite, zero and infinity. That's why zero was so threatening to people. We like to think of things as having a definite beginning and a definite ending. The Greeks and the Romans hated zero so much that they refused to use it, even though it would have made their numbering systems more functional and easier to use. For us today, it's difficult to even imagine a numbering system without zero.

What does this have to do with repentance? It shows the difficulty we all have in accepting new ways of looking at the world, whether in mathematics, physics, business, medicine, religion, or some other discipline. It's hard to give up a set of assumptions that have always been a part of our lives. We all have filters through which we see the world. These filters or patterns help us make sense of the world, but sometimes the filters need to be changed — and that's where repentance comes in.

We all know the difficulty the church and many others had in accepting the views of Copernicus and Galileo that the earth was not the center of the universe. For thousands of years, it was believed that all the planets, including the sun, revolved around the earth. In its time, that picture of the universe made more sense than any other. An earlier view saw the world as flat.

The fact is that we do not easily give up our usual way of understanding things. Once a point of view is generally accepted, we have a lot invested in that way of seeing things. That's why it's so difficult to repent. Those who propose new ways of understanding the world — and especially new ways of understanding God — are often persecuted and killed. They are considered revolutionaries and dangerous.

Jesus is an example. He said that God loves the world and all the people in it. Each one of us is created in God's image. He said that you cannot earn God's love. He said we are to love our enemies, whereas the old view was that you are to hate your enemies. Over and over again, we hear Jesus say, "You have heard that it was said of old, but I say to you."

After a lot of struggle and argument, the early church began to accept the new way. They understood that we are one human race, that we are all children of God, and that God loves us equally — Jews, Greeks, Samaritans, Romans, women, men, slaves, free. However, there are still those today who have trouble understanding that view.

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, turn, and go in another direction. One had to be willing to understand God and God's creation differently and leave many old assumptions behind.

The most puzzling question remains: why do we have so much difficulty repenting and leaving our old ways, ideas, and beliefs behind?

One researcher, Edward DeBono, has studied how the human 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 assumption you've had for a long time) is partly a reluctance to abandon the investment of effort that has gone into the hole without seeing some return. It is easier to go on doing the same thing rather than being creative and finding a new way of doing something. It's hard to give up something we've started. 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. It's hard to give up those things in which we have so much emotion and energy invested.

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."

Repentance is difficult for all of us. Even in the fields of science and business, by far the greatest amount of effort is often directed toward the logical enlargement of some accepted hole, especially when that hole has had some success. When the first electric typewriters were invented, some of the traditional manufacturers of manual typewriters refused to consider the idea. On the other hand, some of the most startling advances in scientific discovery and business creativity have come about through people ignoring the hole that is in process 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 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, to discover things about God we hadn't considered before, and not to get caught up in rigid dogma.

Dogma can come from an outside authority or 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 more accurately describe the heavenly paths. It's no wonder that repentance is such a persistent theme in the preaching of Jesus and the early church. Repentance of this kind is something that needs to be done over and over again because we keep falling back into our old ways.

Another way of understanding repentance is to think of it in terms of unpacking and repacking your bags for your life's journey. That's hard to do because we get so used to carrying around the baggage we have and come to think that we cannot go through life without most of it.

Maybe some of you are carrying baggage on your life's journey that is weighing you down — things that are no longer useful. I'm not talking about material things. You might be carrying patterns of behavior that have helped get you where you are but are not helping get you where you want to be. You could be carrying long-established habits that are not adding to your life but taking away. You could be carrying grudges or resentment that weigh you down and need to be unpacked and left behind. You could be carrying ideas about God that need to be reconsidered.

What, then, is repentance and believing in the good news?

When an individual admits he or she is an alcoholic or is addicted to some other drug or habit and makes a commitment to another way of life, free of that addiction, he or she is experiencing repentance and hearing the good news. Life can be better tomorrow than it is today.

Each time a student in elementary school, middle school, junior high, high school, or college admits that he or she can do better and can be what God intended that person to be, he or she is experiencing repentance and hearing the good news.

Whenever an individual, no matter at what age or place in life, looks at his or her life and knows that he or she can do better and truly begins to live up to the potential which God has given and starts on a new road in a different direction, he or she is experiencing repentance and hearing the good news.

Every time an individual admits to a mistake or failure and decides to turn his or her life around, that person is experiencing repentance and hearing the good news.

Repentance is not being afraid to stop, unpack your bags, look at the things you have been carrying with you, and leave behind those things you do not need — then repack your bags for the continuation of life's journey. When you are able to do this, you are repenting, and you are hearing the good news. Amen.