

**Homily, St. Andrew's
Lent 4C, March 6, 2016
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Last Sunday, in a brief conversation over soup, a parishioner commented about repentance and a need to explore what we mean by “repentance”. For many of us, though probably not all, many of these theological terms come loaded with meaning distilled from a lifetime of usage. We may assume we know what they mean and in the church at large, those meanings have often become tired. A simple or assumed understand may be embraced or rejected, but as a church, we haven't always wrestled with nuance or shifts in understanding, or opened ourselves up to different ways of thinking, different ways of believing or different ways of living out our faith. One of the challenges of our time is to choose faithful courage to explore ideas and how we live them with the openness to be transformed, to be converted anew, and then share this fresh and exciting faith. So what do we mean by “repentance”? What is it to repent?

Let's start with a little word study. The Greek word most often translated into English as “repent” or “repentance” is transliterated as “metanoia”. The concepts we tend to apply to “repentance”: confession; “sorrow for what one has done or omitted to do; especially, contrition for sin”; or looking “back on past behavior with sorrow, self-reproach, or contrition, sometimes with an amendment of life”... These concepts are challenged by scholars as not being true to the meaning of the Greek “metanoia”. Most notably, metanoia is not about emotion but action. Metanoia is about changing mental attitudes and conduct. More than feeling sorry, metanoia is about a spiritual conversion evident in a change of mind, change of heart, change in character, and a change of life. As one scholar defined, metanoia is “a change in the trend and action of the whole inner nature, intellectual, affectional and moral.” (Wiki)

You'll have noticed by now how many times I've just used the word most feared in the church: change. In my defence, I've taken the definitions and understandings just described directly from other sources. But given these definitions, it's not hard to understand why holding on to an understanding of repentance as basically “feeling bad about past behaviour” is attractive. It is easy to feel bad and continue on, doing nothing differently. Even more attractive is a rejection of sin, confession and repentance altogether with a theology that says “just don't feel bad.” Change your feelings without changing anything else. Neither set of beliefs leads to anything constructive or different in real lives, real communities, the real world.

Metanoia, on the other hand, includes the hope and the possibility that things can be different. We can have more fulfilling, more meaningful and more joyful lives. We can create more just, more loving and more gracious communities. The challenge is that this road to greater fullness of life goes through real change... change of mind, change of heart and change of life. Metanoia asks something quite different from us than traditional understandings of repentance... it is something more challenging, perhaps, but it is also something much more powerful and life-giving. Today's Gospel story from Luke: the famed story of the Prodigal Son, the Loving Father and the Elder Brother, gives us a great means of exploring repentance and metanoia.

I suspect that for many of us, we good and faithful church-goers, we identify more closely with the elder brother than the younger. I know I do. Most of us here are the responsible ones. We're the ones who have not demanded too much. We have not gone off to live it up, leaving others behind to do the work. We are faithful and steadfast. And we're the ones most tempted to resentment of those who live more carefree and extravagant lives. Probably the most annoying thing about this story - the clear nonsense in this parable - is the loving father's response to his eldest: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." This gracious father expresses his love for both his sons, just in very different ways. He is the picture of grace and forgiveness. And even though you may, like me, want to roll your eyes and respond, "yeah... whatever!" we can all pretty easily recognize the abundant love of the father. Nothing is said about the eldest's response or reaction. We don't know if he accepts his father's explanation and love and joins the party... we don't know if he huffs off to sulk, to pout or even to demand his inheritance and leave. We don't know if he embraces metanoia with a change of heart.

Parables are meant to challenge our assumptions and expectations. Parables are meant to be infuriating in their oddness and their turning the world upside down. Parables are meant to have an openness of meaning and breadth of possible interpretation. And so I wonder... what if this is a circular story? What if it's a story whose ending is no ending at all but one that pushes us back to the beginning? What if the hardness of the elder son means that he has become the one in need... the one living far from who he was meant to be? What if we are actually the prodigal? What if we are actually the ones in need of a change of mind, a change of heart or a change of life?

Just like we don't know what happens with the elder son at the end of the story, neither do we know what might have prompted the younger son to ask for his inheritance before his father had yet died. But ask he did and his father agreed, giving his young son what he wanted. And then off he went, squandering what he had received in dissolute living until there was nothing left. I wonder what might be meant by "dissolute living"? I think the image we usually have, to put it indelicately, is "sex, drugs and rock and roll..." But what if "dissolute living" is more generally about taking steps away from home, away from living and growing into who we are created to be? What if it's about living inauthentically? What if it's trying to be someone we are not? Such living always uses up all our resources - financial, emotional, mental and spiritual resources - and leaves us in need. When we try to live apart from who we really are, we squander what we have been given.

After living like this for a time; after seeking what he needed away from himself and where he belonged, the moment of truth comes. "He came to himself..." the story says. God isn't mentioned. He comes to himself... and it makes all the difference. It is the moment of metanoia when the prodigal son has a change of mind that leads to a change of heart and a change of life: "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and 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 then he does it. He returns home and says his piece, barely noticing it seems, his father's reaction.

This is a story of true repentance. It isn't about feeling bad, it is about having the courage to be honest with one's self about one's self. And it is about the humility of actually doing something different. The prodigal could have wallowed in his unfortunate choices and difficult circumstance, too proud to make a change. But he didn't. Instead he choose the difficult path of faith and of trust. He chose to make a change, and it paid off in spades, for the love and acceptance he received upon his return was more than he asked for and more, I think, than he could have imagined.

True repentance is not about feeling bad about the past. Metanoia is about choosing a different future by living fully in the present. Metanoia often begins by finally admitting how unhappy you are at a job, in a relationship, or just in your own skin. Honestly facing the reality of today is a necessary first step into making whatever changes might be needed for a more fulfilling, more meaningful or more joyful life. We can't change what we don't acknowledge, Dr. Phil once said. Had the prodigal told himself that it would somehow, magically be different tomorrow... or if he sought to escape the drudgery by self-medicating with alcohol, food or something else... or if he had attempted to fix the problem by just doing more and more and more of the same... nothing would have changed. Metanoia, on the other hand, is about having the courage to resign from a commitment that no longer holds joy, to change careers, to go back to school, to let go of a volunteer job, to embrace a healthier lifestyle, to follow a long-held passion, to take up a new hobby, to accept a new responsibility. Metanoia is about believing the good news that who you were created to be is enough and living into that truth with boldness, generosity and grace.

When the prodigal son returns, his father doesn't say he is forgiven. Instead, his loving father quickly puts together a party with the explanation: "... this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." The prodigal wasn't found by his father; he found himself and changed his life. May we too live fully in the present so that we can notice the ways in which we are lost or in need of a change of mind, a change of heart or a change of life. May we stop feeling bad about the past and choose instead a different future.