

In My Father's Arms
4 Lent, Year C, 2010, March 14, 2010
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So I have to again bring up one of those words we don't like: repentance. Repent, that's what we're called to do during this season of Lent. But we resist this call for two reasons. First, we don't understand what repentance really is. What comes to mind is some half-crazed guy on the street corner screaming, "Repent, the end is near!" And that's a turn-off. We see repentance as some grim, shame-filled, breast-beating, self-esteem-destroying exercise, with us moping around with our heads hung low. This is how we often approach repentance, and I'm all for avoiding that!

The second reason we resist the call to repentance is that we don't think we need it. Oh yes, repentance is necessary for that prodigal son. My, my, wasn't he a loser? Messed up big time. So selfish, treated his father terribly (you know, dad should have put his foot down), then he ran off and squandered all his inheritance ... and can you imagine what he was doing during that time? Those women he was cavorting with? Boozing it up at the bars? Now here is a guy who needs to repent! But thank God, I'm not like him. Repentance is for guys like him, as well as your typical thieves, chain-saw killers and Goldman Sachs CEOs. But not me ... I've tried hard to be a basically good person. I don't really need to repent.

So we resist the call to repentance because we don't understand it and because we don't think it applies to us. But today I'm reissuing the call to repentance, and I'll explain why.

It's easy to come up with a bunch of theological words about repentance, guaranteed to put everybody to sleep. So, I'm going straight to the point about repentance, because it's a matter of life and death – Jesus says that unless we repent, we will perish. And not just the perishing of your body, but your sacred eternal soul, and everything deep and true and valuable and holy about you. Repentance is exactly what you and I need to do ... today.

So, what is repentance, how does it happen, and why do we need it? **There are two steps to repentance.** The first step in repentance is: **Come clean.** Repentance begins with owning up to your role in the mistakes, flaws, pains and selfishness of your life. It involves beginning to see things clearly, taking responsibility for your own situation.

I've been the father of three small children. Here's how it goes. One child is in the next room – you hear a crash and run in – there is a broken dish on the floor – Innocently, the child looks up at you and says, "IT fell." As if the dish somehow did this on its own and it certainly wasn't my fault. Or, there two children are in the next room. You hear a crash. You run in to see what happened. They're both pointing at each other: "She did it!"

You don't have to be a child to exhibit this childish behavior. Two days ago a transient man came by and I visited with him. He was down on his luck, and he had a long story prepared about how all this happened to him. It was all a lot of blaming and finger pointing. Sadly, I am very used to hearing this from such people. Blaming others, not owning up to his responsibility for his situation. I helped this man out, but this guy wasn't going to find lasting help for his life until he began owning up to his part in his problems. I've also often seen this behavior with people who are in prison or habitually in jail. It was all somebody else's fault. The opposite of *repentance* is *childishness*.

Yes, other people have hurt us, yes, we have been the victims of injustice. I'm sorry about that. But until we start owning our part in our messes, there will never be any real hope for us.

Repentance starts with realizing that we need help. No more living a life of denial that we are just fine, no more justifying our lives by pointing our fingers at others. No more looking at the dish and saying, "It dropped." You know, if nothing's our fault, then Jesus died on the cross for no reason.

In our gospel lesson today, the turning point of the whole story is when the prodigal son starts seeing things clearly, when he realizes he has messed up and that he needs help. After he had hit bottom, the text says *when he came to himself*. Another translation says, *when he came to his senses* ... In other words at some point after the self-indulgent son had blown all his money on what the text calls *dissolute living*, and now he was basically starving to death and nobody cares – he begins to see how he'd brought it all on himself. This is the key turning point in the whole story. The son *came to himself* ... this is the beginning of repentance.

Like the worthless son, we must admit that there is a problem. Maybe you've been like that son, totally blown it in your life. Jesus says that the first step toward getting out of the pit you're in is to recognize that there is a problem. This is, of course, the very first step of the successful twelve step method for recovering alcoholics – admit that there is a problem.

But maybe you haven't led a life like the prodigal. Wait a minute, you may say, I'm not like that creepy son. I've never done anything like he did. Well, it's for people like us that Jesus trots out the story of the older son. The older son had worked hard all his life, had been obedient, had done what was expected of him. But there was trouble just below the surface in this older son. Down deep he was resentful of his brother and could not forgive him. Maybe he was even a little jealous and had harbored some envy of that *dissolute living* the younger son had indulged in. And he resented his father too, brings up all his grievances against his dad. The older son is a mess, full of anger, self-righteousness and pride. He needs to repent, but he hasn't gotten to that point of coming to his senses – it's all still someone else's fault ... the worthless brother, the indulgent and biased father, but not me.

Maybe we can relate to that older son. Maybe like him, we are too full of ourselves. Soaked in pride, preoccupied with getting what we think should come to us, or paralyzed by regrets and fears, stewing in our lack of forgiveness, worrying about how we will look to others, hiding behind layers and masks of denial about our real situation. Maybe we try to divert the attention away from ourselves by pointing fingers, making judgments. Holding onto anger and resentment. Yet, as much as we need to change, nobody is going to force us to change. We are perfectly free to carry all our garbage to the grave with us. So the first step in repentance is *come clean*. Admit to God that you need help. You are the only one who can do this.

Once we come to our senses, like the younger son did, we're ready for the second step in repentance: **deciding how you will get the help you need**. We start by realizing we have a problem, and now we must do something about it. We need a plan. The younger son came up with a plan – he would go back to his father and try to hire on as a slave. It wasn't a very good plan, but at least it got him started. And it got him headed toward the one who could help. You see, the plan we need is not so much about what we will do, as about who will help us. On this score the prodigal son got it right.

It's like taking a trip to Denver. There are two ways to get there. We can do it ourselves: get a Mapquest printout, study the maps, or maybe just head out and watch for the road signs. That's one way to get to Denver. It will take effort on our part, and if we get lost in Omaha, we could be in real trouble. Maybe a better way to get to Denver is to turn over the traveling decisions to a more trusted person. Go with someone who knows how to get there, someone who has a perfect driving record, someone who'll guide us each step of the way and whose companionship we will enjoy. Getting to Denver is one thing (most of us could do that), getting through life is another (none of us can do that very well on our own). Repentance is all about getting the steering wheel of life out of our hands and into the One who can help – our father in heaven. You begin repentance on your own, of your own free will, but you cannot complete it without God.

I've been talking about the beginning of repentance, but let's look at the completion of repentance – why go through this? For the prodigal son, the culmination of the story is collapsing in his father's arms – safe, bathed in complete acceptance and peace. You see, repentance is not about gloom and shame and breast-beating. It's about becoming free, being lifted out of the pit, made new, having burdens lifted away, being restored. After all, the culmination of Lent is Easter.

This is so beautifully reflected in our service music during Lent. At the beginning of the service, right after confession, we sing, *Lord have mercy*. We need mercy. We cannot demand mercy, because we don't deserve it. We can only plead for it. *Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy*.

Then during the Eucharistic prayer – you'll see in just a few minutes – right after the bread is broken, recalling for us the breaking of Christ's body for us, the sacrifice he made for us so that we could be forgiven and restored – we sing again about mercy, but now it's sung not with pleading but in peace with gratefulness: *Jesus, lamb of God, have mercy on us, Jesus bearer of our sins, have mercy on us, Jesus redeemer ... grant us your peace*. The culmination of repentance is peace, relaxed and safe in the Father's arms.

I am calling you to repentance today. Not because I want to wag my finger at you in accusation, not because I want to bring you down, not because I want to ruin your self esteem, or because I want to put a storm cloud over your head. In fact, this is not about what I want at all, it's about what God wants. And what he wants is your repentance, so that you may know – like the son returning home -- the joy and the peace and the love of his strong arms, wrapped around you. AMEN