

Repentance, and the forgiveness of sins are the themes of this morning's gospel reading. From all around the countryside,

people are coming to the Jordan River, to be baptized by John.

It is for the forgiveness of their sins, writes Matthew.

For most folks, it is a ritual of washing themselves clean of the past and as far as we know, it is enough. Confessing their sins,

they are ready to start fresh, trying to live out, as best they can, the requirements of Jewish ethics. And, there are others who have come, the Pharisees and Sadducees: John has harsh words for them—he doubts their motives.

I am going to go out on a limb here and guess that repentance

is not a new idea to most of us here today. You have probably already learned a little about what repentance is,

and how repentance is such an important part of the Christian spiritual life.

But since it is such an important act of the heart and mind for Christians,

this morning's sermon is going to be a little refresher course on repentance.

Because clearly, there is repentance and there is repentance.

And when John the Baptist calls attention to the Pharisees and Sadducees, it is a reminder of how easily

we can fall into the trap of misunderstanding repentance.

Lest we ourselves fall into the same mistake, let's start at the beginning,

with a look at what was probably our own first understanding of repentance. Our first of understanding repentance probably happened when we were children, and we'd done something wrong,

and a parent, or grandparent said to us something like this: you just hit your brother, now go say you are sorry.

We may or may not be sorry that we hit our brother—maybe it was a lot of fun to hit our brother, but the tone of the adult's voice lets us know that if nothing else, *we should* be sorry that we hit our brother. And if it seems we aren't sorry, or not sorry enough, there will usually be some kind of punishment to let us know to take the whole thing a little more seriously.

At this stage of the game, we don't have a word for it yey,
but there begins to be a little bit of regret inside of us about certain things we do. Maybe we regret it because we see that what we did made our brother cry. Or maybe we regret it because the time out in our room, or spanking or whatever punishment our parent comes up with makes us wish we hadn't hit our brother. Whether we wish our brother hadn't gotten hurt, or whether we wish that we hadn't been punished, why ever it is that we regret doing what we did, we come to understand that the ticket out of our regret, out of our twingy stomach or twitchy body, is to say we're sorry.

When we are children, the power of saying we are sorry can seem almost magical: things start to look up once we say we are sorry. The angry face on our parent disappears. We either get out of the doghouse, or know we will soon. All is right with the world, and inside us, because we have learned to say those magic words: "I'm sorry."

But saying I'm sorry equals repentance only works if you are a child and you have done something relatively minor—like hit your brother or break a toy.

Repentance, in the true sense of the word goes beyond saying we are sorry. As Christians, we understand repentance to be about turning around.

The word repentance implies that we are going down a road, realize that it is the wrong road, or the wrong direction, and we turn around, and go a different way.

This is how most Christians understand the idea of repentance. Turning and going a different way. Because we use words that our physical, turning around, going a different way, it can seem like when we repent we are all set up for success. For many of us, repentance means a change of heart: we are truly sorry for what we have done and vow to never do it again. We experience the relief of knowing that God forgives, and that is that.

However, there is something more to be known about repentance. True repentance, the Church teaches, requires something usually called 'amendment of life.'

In Christian teaching, repentance, the repentance that does lead to the forgiveness of our sins, is a three part process:

Recognition that we have sinned,
deciding that we don't want to sin that way again,
and then taking steps that will keep us from doing that same sin yet again.

That third step is called the amendment of life. And it is more than just turning around and heading a different way.

It is the amendment of life that bears the fruit worthy of repentance.

It is when not just our heart has changed,
but when we've taken those preventative steps,
that we have truly repented.

In Christian teaching, the sins that are most important to prevent are sins that harm other human beings.

If our actions are causing real harm to other people, God expects us to understand what we have done wrong and work to change our behavior so that the harm stops.

So, over time as our body grows, so also should our insight grow, expanding from understanding that hitting our brother causes him physical pain, to understanding that the way that what we do affects the lives of other people. As our minds mature, God expects that our hearts and conscience will also mature--- to understand that hurting others, not just with a slap, but with greed, or selfishness, or moral laziness, causes real harm to real people and more is needed.

So, for mature Christians, saying we are sorry for the harm we have caused is never enough. And turning our hearts towards a new intention, or in a new direction, even that is not enough.

Christianity teaches that true repentance always involves amendment of life. Not just changing how we feel about things, but changing how we do things, changing our behavior. That is true repentance.

And our Christian hope lies in the fact that when we really have decided to amend our life,

really have invested ourselves in living in the world in ways that imitate Jesus, then God, through the Holy Spirit, is right there, beside us, helping us to do just that. Because, in the end, that's what we Christians believe we were made for—to learn to love like God loves, and to love the world in his name.

Jesus was born to teach us how to do it, and we were born to learn how to do it. Repentance is hard work, at times it is painful work: but amending our life is how we grow into our full maturity as human beings.

Repentance happens personally when we make deliberate decisions about how we will use our intelligence, our energy, our time, our life, and then take the actions needed to live that out.

Sometimes amendment of life also happens when religious leaders or institutions take specific actions to live out the gospel.

Our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry has taken such an action this past week.

Because there has been a history in the Episcopal church of neglect of creation, and a history of injustice towards the native peoples who first occupied that land, Bishop Curry has authorized 30 clergy to act as chaplains to be a presence of spiritual comfort, at the site of the Standing Rock Reservation pipeline protest in North Dakota. The chaplains are, in effect, standing in solidarity with those who will be harmed by the construction of the pipeline, and Bishop Curry is actively standing beside them in support.

Last week, the Episcopal News Service published a copy of the letter sent by Bishop Curry to the governor of North Dakota and the local county sheriff, which I want to read to you today.

In the letter, Bishop Curry acknowledges both the complexity of the situation, and the need that it be handled non-violently. Participation in the discussion about the fate of the land, the water and the human beings who live on the Standing Rock reservation, and a signal from our Presiding Bishop that protestors should be protected

is, in fact, an act of repentance over decades long practices of exploitation in which the Church has often been complicit and from which many Episcopalians have benefited.

There are copies of the letter in the narthex,

and it is posted on both the national church website and on our own Church of the Advent website if you want to see the letter. The letter reads: