

“New Directions, New Connections”  
Isaiah 55: 1 – 9      Luke 13: 1 – 9  
Rev. Wayne E. Gustafson, D.Min.  
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Is it just me, or is the word, repentance, always associated with the threat of punishment. “Repent, for the end is near!” “Repent of your evil ways, or else...” So much of Christianity is built around the notion of turning away from what (we have been taught) is basic human depravity. Its central message has been that if we repent, we will have the chance to get the reward instead of the punishment. If that is how we see things, that it’s all about reward or punishment, then we are relying on a very immature ethical foundation, indeed. Furthermore, this way of seeing repentance has its focus mostly on the moral behavior of the individual.

From time to time, you have heard me talk about the difference between an individualistic religion and a community-based or relationship-based religion. My present hope is that the human race is getting ready to outgrow its relatively immature reliance on individuality so it can embrace a more community-based ethical foundation. This shift is our opportunity for repentance, not as “mending our ways”, but as growth into a new way of being.

Let me give some background. Throughout at least the recorded portion of human experience, roughly the last 6000 years, the basic principles of life have been predominantly individualistic (especially in Western culture). In other words, the most important considerations have related to the lives and contributions of individual persons. Even around concerns over whether someone fits into the community or not, the emphasis is on how well the individual measures up to the generally accepted set of standards rather than placing emphasis on the health of the wider community.

Even the Bible is seen to support that approach. When people read the Bible, they often see what they expect to see. When someone believes that God gives us individuals a “moral test” to see if we will be obedient, then that person will understand today’s Gospel account as supporting that belief: repent as an individual, or suffer the consequences, as an individual. On the other hand, if we are open to finding community-based directives, they are in the Bible, too. And today’s text then has the potential to offer us new meanings and directions for our repentance.

As cultures change and mature, their fundamental principles also change. In a cultural paradigm (or worldview) change, how we see the world and its rules modifies – sometimes in major ways. Clearly, modern culture is living through such a shift in perspective. One way to understand the present shift in perspective is that our worldview is moving from the particular to the systemic, or, said another way, from focusing on the individual to focusing on the community. From the point of view of developmental psychology, it appears that groups (even cultures or species) go through the same kinds of developmental stages that individuals go through. So, from that perspective, it might be interesting to think about how mature we have become as a culture or even as a species. The developmental process just takes a great deal longer. In fact, the larger the group, the longer the process.

So, let's first take a brief look into how individuals develop. If we think about how children grow, we will remember that all children begin life with the experience of being pretty thoroughly connected with their environment, usually through constant relationship with Mother. As they grow towards the pre-teen years, they become very social. In adolescence, even though there is great peer pressure to conform, the ethical focus returns to the needs of the individual once again. Many adolescents have a difficult time seeing that anyone else matters beside themselves. Measuring up is essential and competition is the primary value playing out in that stage of development. In early adulthood, the focus remains on individual ability and needs, but at the same time, people are learning more about how to relate to others. In later life, there can be a redevelopment of a deeper social connection that considers the needs of others in a more profound way. Looking at this brief description, perhaps you can identify a similar developmental process in your own history.

So then, where are we in our cultural development? Well, there are certainly flashes of community concern in our culture, for example the sentiment expressed in John F. Kennedy's great words: "ask not what your country can do for you. Ask rather what you can do for your country." On the other hand, we can easily see that the dominant value in our culture continues to be the individual's accumulation of "stuff", and we also know that very little is said or perhaps even thought with regard to the health of the larger community. (One possible exception to that observation might be measures of the state of the economy, but that measure simply constitutes a kind of totaling up of the economic status of individuals.) I would say that we are still in a pretty individualistic place in our cultural development. At the same time, there are a few signs that we are beginning to experience a shift in perspective resulting in the elevation of the well being of all creation. An example might be the rise in intentional communities in our country and beyond. (See [www.ic.org](http://www.ic.org) for more information on intentional communities.)

If we know (and confess) that we are too focused on our own individual needs, then perhaps the gospel message of repentance is for us. If we look for it, the Bible has much in it that considers the well being of the group and many of its teachings invite people towards maturity in relationship and community. Certainly the Gospel accounts of Jesus life and teaching identify the emerging presence of the Realm of God – we could also call it the Community of God – to be a central feature of the Christian life.

So, in the spirit of the Gospels, I would define the call to repentance, received from Jesus, as an invitation to turn towards community. That means considering the salvation of the group over the salvation of the individual. It means addressing the needs and resources of the poorest and most disenfranchised members of any group as a way to address the health of the whole group. And it means that we must learn the dynamics of cooperation rather than competition or domination.

Finally, the call to repentance means that we must develop a profound awareness of our connection to all of creation. According to the dictates of the Realm of God, our purpose on earth is not to dominate creation; rather, we are on earth to find our rightful place in it. If we continue to seek domination over everything, making our short-term needs more important than the needs of the planet, we will likely make the earth uninhabitable for future generations, if not in our own lifetime. We are called to a kind of repentance that requires us to make difficult

decisions today. We must always consider the consequences of our actions on the well being of those to come. With an individualistic focus, we will never be able to improve the health of the community or the planet. One of the scariest qualities of much of Christian fundamentalism is that it denies the value of this earthly life, as it elevates the importance of saving the individual soul. (There is some slight change in that position as some influential evangelical groups are beginning to include ecological concerns in their preaching.) In negating the value of this life they effectively eliminate the need to care for it or the planet that supports it. If we do not stand up to that short-sighted belief, then we validate it and pass this planet-destroying belief on to our children and grand children.

As the saying goes, we are all on this planet together just as the passengers on the Titanic were on it together. It does no good to wring our hands or rearrange the deck chairs. We must learn to care for all creation, or we will all go down together.

So, in our attempts at repentance during this Lenten season, let us consider a new direction: that we can work for the health of the soul of the community instead of restricting ourselves to the souls of individuals. And in the spirit of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, I invite us to consider new connections with future generations and with the entire ecosphere. Let's accept Christ's invitation to live together in God's Realm.