

More than Good News

The first sermon in the 2009 stewardship focus:
New Love, New Mercy

Lamentations 3.21-24
Isaiah 43.18-19

September 27, 2009

We say we don't know how to pray;
our problem is that we never learned to say:
Thank you! and I'm sorry!
- Ann Weems

The Readings

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning ... 'therefore I will hope in him.'

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

Some people were born to have nicknames; and it seems I was one of them. As the story goes, I received my first nickname - Bobo – some three days before I was officially named after my dad, whose name was James. You can forget James however; I was never called anything other than Bobo; unless of course I was in trouble, and my mom called me by my formal name, James Ronald Crowe Jr. In junior high school, my friends heard our Spanish teacher call me Jaime – Spanish for James – and decided I should be dubbed Hiny. This nickname lasted through my senior year of high school.

As if these nicknames weren't enough, my big sister gave me the worst nickname ever. She called me "Scaredy Cat" ...and it made me so mad! It made me mad, truth be known, because it was true. I was a scaredy cat. I was addicted to scary shows like *Thriller* with Boris Karloff - you know, the greatest Frankenstein who ever lived - and then there were the Rod Serling shows like the *Outer Limits*, *Twilight Zone*, and *Night Gallery*. After watching such shows

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I went to bed looking over my shoulders, reacting to any stray sound, and pulling the covers up over my head. Scaredy cat? You can bet I was.

I was also afraid of my childhood dentist. To be fair, you really can't blame me for this because back in the early days of anesthetics dentists didn't completely trust them. My dentist sure didn't; he didn't know if he wanted to be a dentist or a drill sergeant - no pun intended - and eight times out of ten he would choose not to use Novocain. Oh, you're a kid... it's a small cavity... let's just drill it out.

I was afraid of many things as a child, but the thing that scared me most was when the preacher started goin' off on repentance. This scared me to death, because repentance in the Deep South was a horrific and humiliating thing; it was like some perverse rite of passage, or an initiation hazing gone wrong. Repentance wasn't effective, mind you, until at least a pound of flesh was extracted. Repentance had to be humiliating to be real. And repentance was like voting in Chicago is reputed to be; early and often. The one thing in life you could never do too often was repentance; and we did it at least twice a year when the evangelists cruised into town for the Fall and Spring revivals. You could always spot the evangelist in the crowd; he – and it was always he in those days – was the one with white shoes and an unknotted tie. I don't know why they chose this identifying feature, but they would wear their tie like an ascot; instead of knotting the tie, they just pulled it up and over so it hung flat.

When these guys came to town they wouldn't rest until everyone had repented at least once; and that scared me to death. In retrospect, it wasn't so much the repentance that scared me; it was the God they evoked with their hellfire and damnation sermons. The God before whom we were to grovel was a God of fear and judgment; a God just waiting to extract that pound of flesh. Make no mistake; it was the God they evoked that scared me to death. I could never be sure that I had groveled enough, shed enough tears, or shown sufficient humiliation to whet God's capricious appetite.

I no longer think about repentance in such terms, because the God I see in and through Jesus the Christ is anything but vengeful and capricious. Nevertheless, such specters from the past die hard, and I rebelled against the chosen theme of our stewardship focus; repentance as a spiritual discipline, a key to stewardship. It's not repentance that motivates our stewardship,

I objected; it's the love of God. It's the love of God that the author of Lamentations spoke of, the love of God that Isaiah celebrated; it's the steadfast love of God that's enduring and always new, fresh, and vital. This is what motivates our expressions of gratitude – the boundless love of God - this is what motivates stewardship.

Even as I tried to convince myself to focus exclusively on the love of God, there was a nagging question in the back of my mind; what is wrong with this picture? All memories of old specters aside, to be honest I must recognize that the first step of a grateful response to God is always and invariably repentance. The first step toward stewardship is repentance.

Please note that the repentance I have in mind has nothing to do with fear; it has nothing to do with a God of wrath and judgment; and it has nothing to do with humiliation, feeling absolutely wretched, and crying crocodile tears. Repentance, rather, has everything to do with turning to God in openness and honesty. Could it be that simple? Yes it could, because in turning toward God, we turn away from the dark and disruptive things in our lives that stand between us and God; that stand between us and our family, friends and neighbors; things that obscure our view and sabotage our walk on the spiritual path. This turning, this response to a gift of grace held out to us, is what repentance is; pure and simple.

Repentance is learning to say thank you! and I'm sorry! as Ann Weems reminds us. Repentance is the first step toward the expression of gratitude we call stewardship, because until we embrace the love of God, until we turn to God, we have nothing for which to be grateful. I'll give them one thing, those old Southern evangelists were right in one respect, you can never repent too much or too often. Actually I would say that repentance should be a spiritual discipline. It should be a part of our daily prayer life. It should be a way of life, because there are always things, at least in my experience, that pull us aside, block our way, and set us on a slippery slope leading away from the way of faith. We need to assess and address these things in prayer. We need to be aware of whom we are at any given moment; we need to identify any detours on the way of faith. For example, how do I resist God? What am I blind to? What do I deny?

There are times when I know what God wants to do in, for, and through me, but I don't want any part of it. At such times, I need to repent of denial, turn, and accept the grace of God

that's always waiting, fresh and alive. This is where prayer comes in. In prayer we identify those points of resistance to God. We identify those rooms in our hearts that are closed off to God; and we turn and embrace the loving kindness and ever present mercy of God.

This kind of repentance is a life style. It's a part of our everyday walk of faith. Jesus knew this when he wove repentance right into the prayer for every day he taught us through his disciples; the Lord's Prayer. "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," or, otherwise translated, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us

Repentance is the first step toward the expression of gratitude that we call stewardship; and, oh man, do we have a whole bunch for which to be grateful! Just think about it, there is the boundless and abiding love of God, the mercy of God that is ever present and always new. God's love and mercy never get old, they're never stale, they're never the same ol' same ol', when you wake up in the morning there is new mercy and brand spankin' new grace waiting for you. Isn't that wonderful? We have so much for which to be grateful, God's loving kindness, the promise of forgiveness, guidance, and the companionship of God the Spirit.

We have so many good things to be grateful for, and that's why we recognize the gospel as good news. We celebrate this good news every time we gather. It may sound farfetched, but I am convinced there is something more than good news. But what could be "gooder" than good news? We recognize that the news is good, but we seldom take seriously the deeper truth that it's *always new*. You see, that new thing that God wants to do according to Isaiah – that new thing that God *is* doing if we'll open our eyes - is for us and in us and through us... each day. Faith is not an experience we have early in our lives that we hold close in our hearts, no more than repentance is a onetime experience that we bear with us the remainder of our lives. The way of faith is living every day in the fullness of God, in the newness of what God has yet to do. Living the life of faith means living in vital relationship with God; not the God of judgment and wrath, not the God who's looking to extract a pound of flesh, but the God of love who longs to nurture, nourish, and guide you to along the way of faith that opens out to life in its fullness.

As we begin our annual stewardship focus, ask yourself what new thing God has done *in* you recently; what new thing God has done *through* you recently? God yearns to work in you...

today; God yearns to work through you in the lives of others... today. God is always creative, always looking to do a new thing, making the gospel fresh, vital, and new every day. This good news – and more – is what we have to be thankful for; this good news – and more – is the motivation for the grateful response we call stewardship. Perhaps Ann Weems hit the nail on the head; perhaps living the life of faith, which includes repentance and stewardship – really is as simple as learning to say thank you! and I'm sorry!