



**North Shore
Congregational
Church**
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“Sackcloth and Ashes”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Mark 1: 9-15; Jonah 3

I have mentioned in the past that, if I ever had both the time and inclination to sit down and write a book, it would be titled, “Everything I Know About God, I Learned by Being a Dad.” Over the years it has seemed that it was almost daily that I would encounter some new insight, perspective or appreciation of some element of God’s love for us, our life in God, or something else – that stemmed from our experience as parents. One of those that I found myself thinking about recently, however, was the journey of trying to get our kids, when they were younger, to move beyond “I’m sorry.”

There was many a time, in those younger years, that one of them would do something they weren’t supposed to do, or say something they weren’t supposed to say, or look at us in a way they weren’t supposed to look at us, and all it would take was one glance, one look, one glare in their direction and they would immediately realize what they had done and blurt out, “I’m sorry!” And, that’s all well and good. Contrition is important – and that’s lesson we all need to learn and relearn throughout our lives. But, here’s the problem. In many of these cases – in many of those circumstances in which they were so quick to tell us they were sorry – the reason they were seeing their errant ways so readily is because it had only 5 minutes since the last time they had gotten in trouble for the same thing. And often, it was only 5 minutes before that that they had done it as well.

So, more and more, as we had this experience, we would sometimes frustratedly replying to their apologies with, ‘Don’t just be sorry – stop doing it!’ It was an ongoing experience as a parent, trying to get them to move beyond simply saying, “I’m Sorry.” But, back to my lessons of faith learned from being parent, what we were really doing in that endeavor with our kids was trying to get them to move from contrition to repentance, and I have often found myself taken by the frequency in which we seem to fall short of the same need in our relationships with God.

This is what brings us to our second reading for this morning. For those of you who may not be fully familiar with this story of Jonah, however, I want to take a minute and reset that story before we get into today’s reading. Jonah is called, by God, to go to the land of Nineveh and proclaim, to them, that God is going to destroy their city (and all the people in it). The people of Nineveh had embraced a lifestyle that God labeled as ‘wickedness,’ and God wanted Jonah to go to that land and preach that they were going to be annihilated. Jonah, of course, didn’t want to do that. So, he ran. Jonah went and sought passage on a merchant ship that he believed would take him away from Nineveh and, more importantly, away from this task God had called him to

do. There's an old adage that, if you want to make God laugh, tell him all about YOUR plans. Such, of course, became the experience for Jonah.

Once that ship sets sail, God sends a storm to strike the seas right in the vessels path, the sailors realize that Jonah is the reason that the ship is being threatened, Jonah is thrown overboard into the ocean and finally swallowed by a big fish (we tend to imagine a whale, here, but the story isn't quite that specific). It's there that we get this wondrously humorous image of Jonah, camped out in the belly of some massive fish, when Jonah finally has his 'ah-ha' moment and realizes that maybe, just maybe, running from God isn't such a good idea in the first place. He prays to God, he offers his contrition, he commits to following God, the fish spits Jonah out onto dry land, and that's where we pick up the story in the third chapter of the book of Jonah.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, 2 "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." 3 So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. 4 Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" 5 And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

6 When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. 7 Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. 8 Humans and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. 9 Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them, and he did not do it.

Now, this story of Jonah was brought to the forefront of my mind a few weeks ago, when Sharon and I were wandering downtown Cedarburg a week or two before Christmas. We walked into a store and I saw a set of very plush, expensive blankets, made by a company called Sackcloth and Ashes. It struck me as particularly odd that a company producing items for warmth and comfort would use that for a moniker. There was an ancient Hebrew custom of mourning and penitence in which they would put rough and uncomfortable garments (sackcloth) on their bodies as a sign of penance and pour ashes on their heads as a symbol of ruin. It stuck in my mind because it really didn't seem to be a fitting name for a high-end blanket, but it drew my mind back to this story, because that's exactly what happened in Nineveh.

People began to put on sackcloth, even the king jumped in. He heard the judgment of God, realized the wrongdoings of his people, put on the sackcloth, sat in the dust, and made a proclamation to the people: *"By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. 8 Humans and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from*

their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. 9 Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”

I want you, however, to really consider the details of this decree. *“Humans and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands.”* Notice, here, that the king is commanding far more than an apology. The king, in his decree, extends well beyond contrition. The king, in his decree, realizes that their contrition has to be exemplified through a change of behavior, and it was then, and only then, *“When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them, and he did not do it.”* The king seemed to understand that contrition, and even penance (the act of displaying our contrition), in and of itself, was not enough. The king understood that it wasn’t until repentance was realized that new life could be granted to the people of Nineveh. Or, if I can say it another way, it wasn’t until they moved from contrition to repentance, that the full grace of God could be realized in their lives.

In many ways no different than children, we seem to gloss over that distinction between contrition, penance and repentance. We seem to come to the grace of God with contrition, but struggle to move beyond “I’m sorry.” We neglect or forget that our remorse must be realized in a change of act and behavior. We overlook the fundamental truth that the call upon us is not, ‘Say you’re sorry, and believe the Good News,’ but ‘Repent, and believe in the Good News.’

The grace of God is profound. The mercy of God knows no bounds. The love of God knows no limits. There is no end to the forgiveness of God granted to us in and through the birth, life, teachings, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ. That is a foundational principle of who and what I believe God to be, and who I believe we are in God. None of that changes the fact, however, that the call upon us in light of that grace – the command upon our lives as a reflection of that boundless love – is not a life of contrition, or even one of penance, but a life of repentance, and that is something altogether different.

Contrition, and penance are our ways of showing our remorse – saying we’re sorry – making the offended party aware that we know of our wrongdoing and regret having done it. And, don’t get me wrong – this matters! This is an essential mindset that we try teach our children at a very young age, it is something with which our society frequently struggles, it is something that is imperative to our relationship with others, and it is central to our relationship with God. We need to acknowledge when we have been wrong. We need to be able to say that we messed up. We need to own our misdeeds and voice our remorse. Contrition is important, but the call of faith is to follow our contrition with repentance, and that’s an entirely different thing.

The best common-language explanation I’ve come across, for the Biblical concept of repentance, is to ‘turn away.’ That’s what repentance means in Scripture. When John calls for repentance, when Jesus preaches repentance, when the authors of the Epistles urge repentance, the idea is not that we all stand up and say we’re sorry – or even wrap ourselves in sackcloth and pour ashes on our heads. The idea is that we acknowledge where we have fallen short, own our misdeeds, embrace our remorse, and then change! The idea is not just that we have contrition, but that we

mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually turn away from those misdeeds and commit our lives to a more faithful and loving course.

I have no doubt that every one of us could come up with a long list of things that we have done, in just the past few days, that fall short of what God is longing for in our lives. We can all come up with the list of selfish, injurious, self-indulgent, lustful, deceitful, painful and inconsiderate acts that we have done in recent days – and we can all sit before God and identify those as things that call for our contrition in God’s presence. But, the question we need to ask ourselves is how often we will move beyond “I’m sorry” and actually pursue changes in our lives so that, five minutes from now, we’re not once again saying we’re sorry for the same thing we did five minutes ago.

“Repent, and believe in the Good News.” That is the call of our faith. Contrition is imperative. It is core to our genuine and meaningful relationship with those around us, and with God above. But our faith calls us to go beyond contrition and embrace repentance – a turning away from our wrongs and towards a life of growing faithfulness and love. We will never be perfect, and even the wrongs we do fix will often be replaced with new ones down the road. But, our relationship with God, and our true embracing of His grace shown to us in Jesus, asks us to go beyond “I’m sorry,” so that our remorse is more than just words, but a very life of striving to live in a way that our mistakes of five minutes ago will not be our mistakes in five minutes ahead.