

Repent!

One of the disadvantages of going to seminary is the exposure to systematic theology and systematic theologians; this is especially true if one has developed their own understanding of theology independently of this type of influence until an advanced age. At Union the major course in theology was taught by someone greatly influenced by Karl Barth. He was a Reformed Theologian of the 20th century whose views varied only slightly from those of John Calvin, one of the earliest reformers from the Reformation. There is much to applaud about the themes of systematic theology, but there is also a tendency to focus on certain themes and this may not always be beneficial because it leads us to simplification. There is no doubt that the good news...which is what the word gospel means literally is that Jesus came to redeem us...to give us the message of just how deep and broad God's love for us is. That is the central theme of all the narratives which tell us about what Jesus said and did while he dwelt among us. The theme of God's grace is the theme lifted and repeated within Reformed theology; the unmerited nature of God's grace is stressed over and over; the gift that it represents is the major theme. Underneath that is the Calvinistic understanding that we are all sinners, but we often only give a brief nod to that through the prayer of confession. We somehow often fail to equally stress the points which Dietrich Bonhoeffer lifted in his writings about the cost of discipleship that accepting God's gift of grace might involve. Bonhoeffer termed our acceptance of the gift of grace without giving up our ways of self-centered behavior as "cheap grace". We tend to focus on what we receive and neglect to a great extent what God's expectations are for our response or how we demonstrate our appreciation for the gift we have been given. Perhaps it is more noticeable this year because our readings focus on that very first account which was written down, one of the two accounts which do not include a birth narrative. Instead Mark's narrative begins with the announcement that what follows is "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God". That bold announcement is followed with words stating the beginning happens with preparing a way. In the Hebrew language the word we translate as repent is literally rooted in the verb "to walk"; to repent is to turn and walk 180 degrees in the other direction. Mark's gospel account, declaring that he is giving his readers the beginning of the good news, tells them this beginning is with what the prophet Isaiah said about a way being prepared for the Lord, a way that would make his paths straight. According to Mark, and the other synoptic gospels, this preparation was done by John the Baptizers call for the people to confess their sins and to repent. One of the most striking characteristics of Mark's gospel is the sense of urgency with which he narrates events. His accounts are brief and full of phrases like "at once" and "immediately." Unlike the other two synoptic gospel accounts, Mark does not give us the details of the time Jesus spends in the wilderness after his baptism by John. We are only told that Jesus was tempted by Satan. However, when he emerges from this experience to begin his own ministry, before Mark begins

giving the details of that ministry we are given this as the opening synopsis: "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'" Before he calls his disciples to teach them the ways of the kingdom, before he begins healing and teaching others, Jesus calls on those to whom he speaks to repent and believe in the good news he brings of God's love, telling them that if they live according to what he will tell them of the kingdom, then the kingdom is near. But like John the baptizer, there is included a call for those who wish to come into the kingdom to repent of the ways they are currently living. Repent and hear the good news of God's love. We often only focus listening for the good news of God's love, wanting to ignore our need to look at our lives to see if we have need to repent. Our passage from the book of Jonah gives us some insight into this topic of repentance...both from the Lord's perspective and from ours. The passage we have before us today is from the third chapter of a four chapter narrative. We become familiar with the first chapters of this story from lessons taught in Sunday School. Those stories about the prophet Jonah who tries to flee from the mission which God gives him. He gets on a boat going in the opposite direction, a storm arises, threatening all aboard, Jonah confesses the whole mess is his fault, Jonah get thrown into the sea which quiets the storm, he gets swallowed up by the whale, and spends three days in the whale's belly. Jonah prays to the Lord from the whale's belly and is then "spewed" back upon land. This part of the story takes up the first two chapters, but there is a back story to it. There is a history to why Jonah does not wish to accept this from God. The mission that God has asked Jonah to do is to go and warn the people of Nineveh that their wickedness has come to the attention of the Lord. Nineveh is the capital city of a kingdom that is a traditional enemy of the people of Israel. That the Lord is considering bringing judgment against them is not an unappealing idea to the Lord's prophet Jonah. In fact, it seems that as the story unfolds, the reason that he flees from this mission is that he anticipates just exactly what will happen. Jonah anticipate the Lord's reaction should Nineveh repent. Our passage begins with the third chapter where we are told "the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to the message that I tell you." This time, Jonah goes and to the city and according to our text, it was a truly great city. It took three days to walk across it. Jonah goes into the city, evidently about a third of the way...a day's walk and cries out the message he was given: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." Because of the difference in languages in Hebrew, Jonah's message was five words long. A five word warning, but what an effect it had. Evidently the people who heard the message from this reluctant messenger got the message that God was behind the message because they believe judgment was imminent, they proclaim a fast. The king when he heard also made a proclamation about fasting and asking his people to cry mightily to God. He also proclaimed that "all shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands." The king was open about his motive: "Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn

from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.” And as Jonah feared and the king and people of Nineveh hoped, “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.” That is where our passage leaves the narrative. It leaves us with the picture of God’s grace toward those who repent of their evil ways, even when the message is reluctantly given by God’s prophet Jonah. It is a pity in a way that the passage lift up for us stopped at this point because the crux of the story has more depth. Jonah has given probably the most minimal response that he could to God’s mission. He did not want this mission, but since he went you would hope that he would be satisfied that he was successful in accomplishing what God wanted from him. Chapter 4.1: “But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, ‘O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning: for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful and slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.’” Jonah is angry that God extends love and forgiveness to his enemies. Jonah goes out of the city to watch what will happen to it, complaining to God about his relenting. God reproves Jonah for his anger. All in all this small book is an interesting study about our expectations for God’s grace to be extended towards us, but not to others; that we have standards that we think God should apply which should perhaps preclude others from that grace. Throughout both the Hebrew Scriptures and the gospel accounts there is a clear message that we need to turn toward God, we need to tune our lives to the expectations that God has for us, for the relationships that God desires to have with us and for the relationships that God expects us to foster among ourselves, among all of us...not just certain select groupings. I don’t know how many of you watched the inauguration this past week but I did with a great deal of anxiety after what I had watch occur on those same Capitol steps two weeks before. But the most lasting memory I will probably have will be of the young woman in a bright yellow dress who gave the poem she wrote for the occasion. It was a beautiful poem and a call for a vision she lifted from the scripture: “Scripture tells us to envision that everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree and no one shall make them afraid.” We are a long way from that right now, for many reasons. One of them seems to be that we have forgotten that warning from John Calvin that the human mind has a tendency to be an “idol making factory”; another seems to be as a society we seem to have forgotten that we are called to love one another in many places according to all the gospel accounts, and that God’s grace is given not according to our standards, but God’s. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.