

THE HOPE JOURNAL

LEARNING TO LOVE, TOGETHER



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REPENTANCE

We are already turning

by Drew Downs

The word repent means to turn and go another way.

In Mark, we see that repentance is the driver of Jesus's ministry and the very mantle he takes up from John the Baptizer. It is also what Jesus demonstrates in Mark 8, when he rebukes Peter for getting between him and God's mission.

Repentance is a tricky word.

We might be tempted to relegate it to street corners where all together too many people preach separation and condemnation. But that is a terrible idea, albeit an understandable one.

We are called to turn toward God. To follow God's command. To change direction when we're off track. Which, despite the rigid insistence of these would-be prophets, is something we're already doing.

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WHAT'S GOING ON

"You know we've got to find a way

To bring some loving here today".

-Marvin Gaye

This past week, we celebrated Holypalooza for the eighth time in nine years. It was a celebration full of emotion as we long for "normal" and celebrate this joyous opportunity.

It also represented a shift in direction; the natural evolution of time and circumstance. The vision of its three founding pastors (now long gone from this community) remains, but the substance is evolving with its new participants.

Our worship began with singing and shared leadership. And yet, early on, we could see the very challenge of our time when the leader of the children's moment couldn't be there because (of course): quarantine.

The focus of the event, however, was fitting to the moment and our history. Not merely unity, or the goal of getting together, but of reconciliation: the hard work of building wholeness from where there is brokenness. We shared with one another calls for lofty ambition and common sacrifice. It was deep, moving, and represented a generous new commitment for our moment.

We were also interrupted by a young man calling for our repentance for our sinful ways. He singled out our support for LGBTQ+ persons and community as part of that sin.

There are many things I think must be said about that moment and I will try to quickly name a few of them.

1. This young man was witnessing – a practice far more familiar to other traditions.
2. It takes courage to speak one's convictions and to suffer scorn. I have no doubt that he felt that he was preaching the gospel.

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3. Much of our anger toward the young man was about decorum – that he interrupted us, which is unseemly.
4. But it is also deeply unfair that he might steal this opportunity.
5. The Rev. Mike Riggins handled the moment well, both naming the indiscretion while inviting us to remember his humanity.

I was, however, contemplating the silence. First, the silence at the beginning of the moment when we were embodying the silence specifically there from within the liturgy. After we pray over the bread and before we eat it. Silence. Interrupted.

And then I contemplated the silencing effect of the young man condemning us. Knowing that some people were seething and others were hiding and still others were wondering what to do. A thousand ideas came into my head; the snarkiest of which is simply that we had already, quite literally, confessed our sins. In other words: we repented already. He clearly wasn't paying attention!

Even as Mike spoke into the moment after the young man ran away, I was still left with the silence. The profound silence in the room. Nobody moving or talking. No interrupting the interrupter. Everyone seeming to want someone else to handle it.

And I thought about the ways siblings in Christ are silenced by their gender identity or theology. How they are always on the receiving end of hate and reminded to turn the other cheek – all from within the church.

I thought of how victims of abuse in the church might have felt in that room. How they might have felt that silence quite differently. How they may have left communities that condemned them in that exact way, hoping to find refuge in our community.

And then I thought of my own silence – happening right then. And I felt ashamed.

It felt very much like this young man was getting exactly what he wanted.

There are very real reasons not to speak. Like me, I know you offer a great deal of restraint every day. But Sunday, I felt convicted. Not by what he said, but what I didn't.

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Our common vision as neighbors was thoughtful and courageous. We demonstrated a true example of repentance and commitment to common witness. And we did this by showing our commitment to common cause, not individual certainty.

That young man entirely misunderstood what he was witnessing in church that day. He was seeing a vision of repentance and turning toward God's command. And it was *he* who was getting in the way.

While we did not use the lectionary for Holy Palooza, we did at our 8:00 service. The assigned reading for the day? None other than the portion of Mark 8 when Peter puts himself between Jesus and Jerusalem, tempting him to reject God's command. This young man, so *certain* of what God wants, tried to stand between us and our common goal of *doing what God has commanded*. Repent. And Reconcile.

So perhaps the most Jesusy thing we could have done was to use Jesus's own words:

"Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

May we continue to show our deep witness to the love of Jesus, commit to our common project of reconciliation, and learn to speak up. Not only for our convictions. But for the beautiful things God is already doing in the world.

Peace be with you.

Drew+

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