

MARK 1:14-20 (YEAR B, Third Sunday after the Epiphany)

This Gospel of Mark calls each of us to repentance. In the past, I've never really felt that word "Repentance" to be compelling, but instead rather scary. As a child going with my grandmother to her Old, Regular Baptist church revival services, REPENT! was a *favorite* word of the Preacher, and he used it frequently and in a loud and suspicious way - pointing his accusing finger at us as he circumnavigated that finger all around those of us in attendance. Clearly, he thought we all were wildly sinning and needed that repentance he preached about lest we suffer the blazing pits of Hell! But for me, he was way too terrifying to approach for confession or forgiveness! He more closely resembled the fiery personality of John the Baptist, rather than the disarming, invitational nature of Jesus about which we heard in today's Gospel.

Over these many years of my life in the church, my understanding of Repentance has changed from my early childhood to seeing repentance as a merciful opportunity to change my ways. Spiritual maturity doesn't happen quickly, but it surely begins by accepting Jesus' invitation to change those habits which prevent us from drawing closer to God. It also calls us to stop doing those things which *divide us from each other*.

Whether we are long-time members of a Church, or the person listening today who has long-since left the Church for any number of reasons, we all fall away from time to time; away *to those things* which we know in our hearts will block our relationship with God and estrange us from our neighbors and family members. It may be working too many hours in our careers, leaving us too tired to spend valuable time with our families, or drinking too much alcohol to numb us from the pain and disappointment of estranged relationships, or spending more than our fair share of money on fancy houses or cars or exotic vacations, leaving us anxious at not having enough to pay the bills. All of these distracting behaviors keep us from looking deep within and facing our demons.

Just like in the lives of Simon and Andrew, and James and John, Jesus comes into our lives today asking us to repent from these harsh, life-killing habits and turn to him. Jesus knows we cannot make such a major shift in our lives without God's healing power. This repentance is a willingness to be changed by offering our will over to God's Will in our thinking, in our interactions with others, and in our daily choices and behaviors. It begins by asking God to forgive us, and show us, moment by moment, day by day, year after year, how we might replace our judgmental thinking and unhealthy ways of interacting and behaving... with self-control, kindness, forgiveness, and mercy in order to rebuild those relationships and situations in our life. The change repentance makes in us is never finished - it is ongoing for as long as we live. God keeps refining us and welcoming us into greater intimacy with Him and greater love for our neighbor. There is no doubt that we will fall short over and over again, but don't give up because God never gives up on us! Through God's constant loving invitations to draw closer, we are called to serve this creation, humbly following a new way of life. And like the apostles, we are neither righteous or knowledgeable enough, but God's power will be made known in spite of our weakness.

Jesus didn't seem to care about whether or not the Apostles were educated, sinless, well-connected or even clean. And Like them, we are mostly, just trying to get by in a world which seems to have gone crazy. Even, *and perhaps especially* now, amid what we have seen these past weeks take place in our nation - the hatred and divisiveness and violence - STILL, God Calls to you and to me, to turn again to Him in repentance, offering ourselves to the service of God and hope for the world for a better tomorrow for all people. And Sisters and Brothers, that service in the world looks like Justice, Humility, Mercy, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation.

These are not simple or easy, but they are the pathway we must walk as we follow God and love our neighbor as ourselves. The Gospel today tells us that the Kingdom of God has come near to us in the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As MLK,Jr. has been quoted saying, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness. Only light can do that." Jesus is calling us to follow him, in spite of danger or adversity, to shed the Light of Christ wherever we find Darkness in our world. AND, he calls us to be the light!

To end I'd like to read a quote from Brother Curtis Almquist of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist: Jesus chooses to build his church upon Peter's leadership, not because Peter was so strong, but because he was so weak. Peter's brokenness (like ours) became Jesus's real breakthrough to him. It's not that Peter was amazing - no, it was that God's grace was amazing. And so it is with us: God's grace will be made perfect in our weakness."

May each of us offer whatever gifts we have, to God's glory and for God to use as he transforms the world. Amen.