

**Haydenville Congregational Church**  
**The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian**  
**March 7, 2010**  
**Luke 13:1-9**

**“Repent or Perish”**

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Repent or perish.

The reading that contains that difficult phrase in the Gospel of Luke turns up in the Lectionary every three years...the passage in which Jesus actually says, “I tell you, unless you repent, you will all perish...” And every cycle when this text appears in the Lectionary I manage to find a way to avoid preaching on it.

Each Sunday, the Lectionary offers the pastor alternative readings so technically a preacher can choose among the different options. But ONE reading in the Lectionary always appears in bold, a strong suggestion that THAT is the text you are supposed to preach on. And this reading always appears in bold! But bold or not, I have found ways—year after year—to justify sidestepping this passage and choosing something else, something less controversial, something more tame, something less scary. Something where I don’t have to ask: “Could Jesus really have said that?”

In her ground-breaking book *Text of Terror*, Phyllis Tribble writes about Biblical stories we don’t want to look at—stories that scare and disturb us. Stories without happy endings, without community celebrations, without redemption, it seems....stories like the rejection of Hagar, the rape of Tamar, the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter.

Today’s passage from the Book of Luke does not rise to the level of a “text of terror” but it is alarming and I know I am not the only preacher who has avoided choosing this text as the basis of a sermon. I am not the only preacher who has presented Jesus as a faithful friend, brave change agent, loving companion who would not turn to his followers and say: repent or die. It seems out of character. I may refer to Jesus as embodying the mystery of being fully human and fully divine but when he acts fully human I don’t know what to do with him.

Why so harsh, Jesus? Why not soften your message and suggest that repentance is good for the soul. If you repent God will forgive you, you will feel better, you will be unburdened, you will draw even closer to God.

Why not say it like that?

Jesus, do you have to say, “Unless you repent, you will all perish...” TWICE in the space of three lines?

Well apparently the answer is YES. Jesus felt he had to say, repent or perish, twice in one short interaction with his followers. And so we must, finally, understand why and confront this difficult passage.

I have been praying on this text. And here is what I have come to understand.

Jesus loves us enough to want us to be whole and free from sin. He wants us to be clear vessels receiving God’s love and grace and sharing those with the world. AND if we put this story in context, Jesus is quietly preparing for the cross. He has turned his face toward Jerusalem. He has already spoken about not fearing those who kill the body, he has already referred to those who will deny him, he has already made an oblique reference to the resurrection saying that his followers should “be ready,” for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. Jesus has turned his face toward Jerusalem. He is preparing for the cross and he does not want to embellish lessons that need to be simple and clear...

Repent or die.

The cross is waiting. He has no time for small talk.

He wants to cut to the chase....this is my message to you:

repent so that you can be whole, repent so that you can be empty vessels to be filled with love and goodness,

repent so that you can be well used by God.

Repent or die. Maybe he means die a spiritual death. Or maybe he doesn’t.

Maybe that is just me, wanting again to soften Jesus’ words and meanings.

He is moving toward the cross, and he is getting blunt and confrontational in his message.

“I have things to tell you before I leave you,” maybe he is thinking that.

“And you are not getting it. You are missing the point. You have not even fully understood who I am yet and so I am going to get direct and provocative. I am going to challenge you. This is hard, can you deal with it: repent or perish.”

As I have prayed on this text I have found myself thinking about a phrase often heard in churches these days: “God loves you just the way you are and too much to let you stay that way.”

This has shed some light for me on the “repent or perish” passage. Jesus loves us so much, just the way we are, and too much to let us stay that way. He does not want us to be distracted and distant, encumbered and sinful, ashamed and withdrawn. Jesus wants us to be our best selves, our purest selves, our clearest vessels, he wants us to be like him.

And he is running out of time to help us get that way. So he has started talking in short-hand hoping we will hear, catch on, be startled and stirred, and make changes.

When the Rev. Dr. Peter Gomes, a Professor and Pastor at Harvard, came to Northampton last year and spoke at Smith College, he said this: “If you boil down the entire Gospel to just one word, that word would be: change.”

In the original Greek, the term repent is “metanoia.” Metanoia refers to a change of mind—repentance being necessary and valuable only because it brings about a fundamental change of mind. This change of mind results in an altered person who rejects sin and embraces good will, goodness and grace...it is the integration of self in relation to universal harmony. The Greek term metanoia denotes a reorientation, a transformation in a person’s outlook, a shift in an individual's vision of the world and of her/himself, and a new way of loving others and the universe. Metanoia involves not simply regret about past wrong-doings but a recognition that one cannot live separated from God.

Jesus may be speaking in short-hand, but when he says “repent,” he is trying to convey the change embedded in the Greek word metanoia. He is saying you need to CHANGE, I am in a hurry. I am telling you now, you have the capacity to grow and change so get busy doing that. Don’t live separated in any way from God. Repent or you will die inside. Maybe he meant repent or you will literally die. I am unsure. But what I do know is that there is both urgency and profound love in his message: have a change of heart, do not live—you cannot live—separated from God.

When I was in Divinity School we were required to study preaching or homiletics for several semesters during the three years. One semester I studied with a soft-spoken, gentle visiting professor who everyone in the class loved. He was supportive, available and caring—he was like the dream professor. Everyone in the class was required to prepare and preach three times to the class during the course of the semester. As we all stood nervously in front of our classmates and the professor and delivered our sweated-over sermons, we came to realize that in

the feedback time, this lovely professor made only positive remarks. “I loved the opening,” he would say when we sat down.

“The story you told was vivid and illustrative of the points that unfolded.”  
“Your ending was strong and inspiring.”

Over time, my classmates and I realized that we loved this professor because he was such a good and kind person, however, we were not improving as preachers under his tutelage. We were over-praised and we realized we would finish the semester with the same preaching ability that we had when we began the course. Our too-kind professor did not criticize us, did not make us improve, did not make us stretch, did not make suggestions—he just told us we were great. We WERE great people but not great preachers and so he was not really helping us.

I thought about that lovely man as I wrestled with the Luke text this week. Jesus did not fall into that trap. He criticized his followers, he told them they needed to repent. And he would say that to us as well. We all need to repent. Jesus’ followers tell him about the suffering of some Galileans who died awful deaths and they ask him: did those Galileans suffer because they were particularly sinful? Jesus says no. You all need to repent. You all need to repent, and you probably need to repent daily. And I am going to tell you this without flinching, because I love you. Jesus is harsh with his followers because he loves them dearly. He is willing to risk them not loving him in return and them being offended by his direct admonishing so that he can get his point across—he wants to drive his point home. Unlike the sweet preaching professor I had in Divinity School, Jesus is set on catapulting his followers into making real and pronounced change. Jesus is talking about metanoia, a change of mind that assures that his beloved followers will not be separated from the love of God.

What Jesus knows and as a good Jew probably grew up hearing is that God forgives those who repent and welcomes God’s children home again and again.

Jesus probably grew up hearing this passage from the Book of Isaiah in the Hebrew Scriptures: “...let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.” Isaiah 55:7

If we repent...if we experience metanoia—a change of heart and mind so God’s grace fills our souls and courses through our veins—we will be forgiven.

Note that in our worship service, our Confession is always followed by an Assurance of Pardon. That is God's promise: confess, repent, come home and I will forgive, pardon and welcome you with my arms open wide.

I remember years ago leading a Bible Study class with a group of inmates at the Hampshire County Jail and House of Correction. After one class, I asked one of the inmates to close our session with prayer. The young man began his prayer with these words, which I have not forgotten, "O God of second chances...."

When in prison, you are very interested in a God who hears our confessions, trusts our repentance, guides our change of mind and offers a second, third and fourth chance.

Repent or die. I think Jesus said that out of love.

As I prayed on and studied this passage in Luke this past week, I found myself turning to theologians and scholars to see what others had written about this text in commentaries and in journals. I found in this month's issue of the journal *Christian Century* a reflection on this reading by the Rev. Kae Evensen, pastor of the Mercy Seat Lutheran Church in Minneapolis.

Rev. Evensen calls the words *repent or perish* "hard and true." She writes, "We cannot dismiss or alleviate their difficulty in any way, but they are only half the story. The other half, the grace that is given in response, does not depend on us, but on the One who will not allow us to be separated from God's love."

Rev. Evensen goes on to say, "The other side of "repent or perish" is "forgiveness and life."

Rev. Evensen's reflections on this text helped me a great deal. But what I also found fascinating in the article was a typographical error that I thought might have been a Freudian slip made by her fingers. The good pastor writes movingly about the "repent or perish" text but in the middle of the essay, she refers to the passage as "repent AND perish." Maybe Rev. Evensen made that little slip when she wrote the article, maybe the type-setter at *Christian Century* made that goof. Whoever caused that subtle mutation from "repent OR perish" to "repent AND perish" actually did me a great service because when I read words "repent and perish," the passage broke open for me in a new way. It occurred to me that both versions are true, both are real, both make sense. Jesus may not have said "repent AND die" but in fact we do. We repent, change, grow, evolve, draw closer and closer to God and we still die. We repent and die, and I believe we enter a place of peace

gathered to the divine being who has been whispering in our ears while we were alive on this earthly plane. Repent or die may refer to literal death but it certainly can mean a spiritual death. Repent and die means we repent throughout our lives, daily maybe, reaching out to God, asking for forgiveness, waiting to hear that assurance of pardon AND we still die in the end. But while living we have had that change of heart and mind captured in the term metanoia. While living we have understood on a profound level that on the other side of repentance is forgiveness and life.

Jesus was harsh with his followers. He was blunt and stern. He had turned his face toward Jerusalem and was not interested in soft pedaling his message. Jesus loved his followers, and he loves us enough to urge us to do what is good for our hearts, souls and minds: repent. Jesus loves us enough not to let us remain separated from God in any way. He loves us enough to be critical of us, hard on us and to urge us to change.

Repent or perish. It is hard to hear. But Jesus was telling the truth as he knew it. And he was also saying: I love you just the way you are. AND too much to let you stay that way.

Praise God.

Amen.