

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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A Community of Repentance

Joel 2:12-17

Joel was busy making plans for a service of rededication. Scriptures needed to be selected. Hymns needed to be picked. PowerPoint slides needed to be prepared. Bulletins needed to be printed. Joel also wanted to announce the gathering on the congregation's new electronic sign, including his sermon title: "Rend Your Heart and Not Your Garments." Surely that summary would attract the eyes and attention of drivers who passed by the house of worship.

But Joel had to be careful not to get too caught up in what he planned to say. After all, the only reason he would be speaking was because God was speaking. And the crux of what God was saying is captured in the opening verse of today's text: "Even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning" (v. 12).

Some translations render the opening word as "But." In the verses leading up to today's text, the future of God's people looks incredibly bleak. They're threatened by death with an unparalleled locust plague, the devastation of crops, and the resulting decimation of livestock. This is interpreted as the leading edge of the "day of the Lord" (1:15), a day of ultimate judgment. That's why the opening word of our text is so striking. "But." In the midst of their present catastrophes, there's still hope for God's people. "But." "Yet even now." These are words that open the door to a different outcome, a different future. God's people have the opportunity to repent and rededicate themselves to the Lord.

Eugene Peterson captures it well in his version of today's opening verse: "But there's also this, it's not too late—God's personal Message!—"Come back to me and really mean it! Come fasting and weeping, sorry for your sins!" Joel wants to help the people answer God's call. He wants to help them come. That's why he's busy making plans, updating the congregation's homepage and pushing out notifications on social media about the service of rededication.

Imagine being a member of the congregation and getting Joel's rededication service email, with one word in the subject line: Repent. Folks would have recognized the term, and understood its meaning, probably more than most people in our day and time. Repentance is a word that has gone out of fashion, partly because it requires us to face the reality of sin in our lives, individually and together. Add to this the fact that repentance is often thought of as just a matter of feeling remorse over our wrongdoings, when in fact it involves concrete changes in our behavior, and it's no wonder that the call to repent sounds so ancient.

But repentance remains inseparable from the gospel. In today's Scripture reading from Matthew, Jesus begins his public ministry with this message: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (4:17). The good news about Jesus Christ enables us to see the bad news about ourselves. As Eugene Peterson puts it, "Repentance is a realization that what God wants from you and what you want from God are not going to be achieved by doing the same old things, thinking the same old thoughts."¹ No, God wills that you turn away from

sin and turn toward him, and go in the direction that his reign is going. This involves a renewed commitment to do the will of God.

And who is this God? To answer that question, Joel draws upon one of Israel's most basic creeds: "Return to the Lord your God, *for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love...*" (v. 13). "Gracious" has to do with God's goodwill toward us. "Compassionate," sometimes translated "merciful," has to do with the love of a parent for a child. "Slow to anger" has to do with not rushing to punish, but patiently waiting for repentance and turning. "Love," often translated as "steadfast love," has to do with God's faithfulness, his everlasting commitment to his covenant relationship with his people. This is the core of who God is and what God is doing.

Compare this understanding of God to the following satirical, superficial prayer based on a modern overhaul of a traditional public confession of sin found in the *Book of Common Prayer*:

Benevolent and easy-going Parent: We have occasionally had some minor errors of judgment, but they're not really our fault. Due to forces beyond our control, we have sometimes failed to act in accordance with our own best interests. Under the circumstances, we did the best we could. We are glad to say that we're doing okay, perhaps even slightly above average. Be your own sweet Self with those who know they are not perfect. Grant us that we may continue to live a harmless and happy life and keep our self-respect. And we ask all these things according to the unlimited tolerances which we have a right to expect from you. Amen.²

God's grace isn't meant to give us an excuse to keep on sinning. On the contrary, God's grace is meant to move us to true repentance and reform.

At one level, this kind of repentance is deeply personal. Our gracious and compassionate God deals with us individually. His steadfast love calls upon each of us to search our hearts and minds. In many parts of the Christian community this emphasis on self-examination comes to the fore this time of the year with the arrival of Lent. Lent is a season of spiritual preparation leading up to Easter. It's a time for inward reflection and outward spiritual discipline, including practices such as prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. During Lent, followers of Jesus focus even more intently on Christ's suffering and sacrifice.

In many traditions, the beginning of Lent includes Psalm 51, which is often recited as an expression of sorrow and repentance for personal sin. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.... Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (vv. 1-2, 10). Notice the stress on how you and I have personally sinned against God and need to turn back to him, not only for forgiveness but for personal renewal and change.

So as I said, repentance is a deeply individual and personal matter. But it's also a communal matter. Joel doesn't contact each person in the congregation and urge them to search their heart and mind in an exclusively private way. True, they need to examine themselves individually. But they need to do so in the context of the entire community of faith. So Joel follows God's instructions to "call a sacred assembly" and "gather the people" (vv. 15, 16). Bring them together, from the youngest to the oldest. Summon everyone to a meeting with God. It's time for personal, and corporate, repentance and rededication.

One pastor tells the following story about a corporate worship experience in his congregation:

Every year at our Ash Wednesday service people have an opportunity to write their sins on a piece of paper, fold the paper, and then pin it onto a wooden cross as a reminder of Christ's forgiveness. One year a family came to the service, and they walked through the worship experience as an entire family. When they came to the confession station, they explained to their 6-year-old son the practice of confessing their sin and writing it on the paper.

So when they all grabbed a sheet of paper and started writing their confessions, he did the same. Remember, he is 6, so he started writing with large, clear block letters. The rest of his family wrote their confessions and then carefully folded the sheets so no one could see the sins they had written down. They intentionally left their names off of the paper as well. Then they walked to the cross and pinned their "sins" on the cross.

This 6-year-old wrote, "God, I'm sorry because I lie." But then he signed his name, and he refused to fold it. He walked to the front and pinned it to the cross. His parents asked, "Why did you put your name on it? Don't you want to fold it up so no one can see?" Then he said, "I wrote my name on it because I want everyone to see it. Because if they know it was me, maybe they can help me stop."³

Here was a child who knew that in order to practice repentance, we need one another in the life of God's people. For in addition to damaging our relationship with God, our sins damage our relationships with others. By contrast, confession and repentance help create and deepen communion between yourself and God, and between yourself and others in the people of God. Our unity as a congregation depends partly upon our willingness to go to one another and say, "I recognize that what I said and what I did was wrong. I'm sorry, and I'm here seeking forgiveness and reconciliation." Or to say, "I continually struggle with this particular sin. I need you to pray for me, and to point me toward other people or resources who may be able to help."

Repentance isn't just a personal, private thing. It's also a people of God thing. This becomes even more important in the social media era that we inhabit, where sins get broadcast in public and denounced in public. In many cases, this includes the destruction of people's lives, in public. Once a person's transgressions, or even alleged transgressions, appear online, it becomes open season for all sorts of vitriol, hatred, and condemnation. Occasionally there are glimpses of mercy and reconciliation, such as a few years ago when Dan Harmon, the creator of the NBC show *Community*, publicly apologized during a podcast for his unwanted advances and subsequent retaliation against Megan Ganz, one of the show's writers. A day after Harmon's apology, Ganz called it a "master class in how to apologize." She also stated on Twitter, "This was never about vengeance, it's about vindication. That's why it didn't feel right to just accept his apology in private (although I did that, too). Because if any part of this process should be done in the light, it's the forgiveness part. And so, @danharmon, I forgive you."⁴

At the same time, we have to be careful and cautious using about cyberspace as an arena for repentance and reconciliation. It certainly holds possibilities. But there's still nothing like the flesh and blood interaction and communion of life in the church. Within a local congregation, we have face-to-face relationships where we can grow in giving and receiving mercy. We have spiritual siblings who can show us what godly correction looks like. We have fellow disciples who can patiently help us grow in holiness. After all, repentance isn't just a one-time experience that happens when you first come to faith in Christ. It's a daily matter of turning away from sin and turning toward God.

That's one of the greatest gifts and forms of witness that we as the church have to offer the world, namely, that the reconciliation and peace we humans need isn't just with one another but most of all with God. I like the way that Carl Truemann puts it when he says

that in our contemporary context, “One finds many horizontal repentances directed toward other men and women, but little that is directed heavenward.”⁵ The call of God through Joel isn’t just to turn back to one another but to turn back to the Lord, who is “gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.” This merciful God has assembled us to be a community of repentance, practicing among ourselves and exhibiting to the world what it means to return to him with all our heart.

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Run with the Horses: The Quest for Life at Its Best* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2019) n.p.

² Adapted from David Head, *He Sent Leanness: A Book of Prayers for the Natural Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1959) 19.

³ Adapted from a sermon by Kevin Kim, “Total Nakedness.” Preaching Today. <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2012/september/2091012.html> (March 3, 2022).

⁴ Glenn Whipp, “A year after #MeToo upended the status quo, the accused are attempting comebacks-but not offering apologies.” *Los Angeles Times* (October 5, 2018).

⁵ Carl R. Truemann, “Woke Repentance.” First Things. August 25, 2020. <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2020/08/woke-repentance> (March 3, 2022).