

The Eternal Catalyst of Change

September 11, 2022

Repent is such a powerful word. For most of us, it conjures visions of tent revivalists imploring listeners to turn from their sinful ways. Don't worry; I'm not asking any of you to come forward to "be saved" in front of all of us. But I do want to talk about the meaning of the word repent in Jesus' time and now.

In fact, the origins of the word repent come much later than Jesus; "repent" first shows up in the 1600s of France. Definitely, the word suggested atonement and sorrow for wrongdoing. It later became the base for the word penitentiary or prisons. But the word did not exist in Jesus' time; instead, the Greek word "metanoia" suggested something much different. Meta means change, noia thinking. Perhaps we can consider the word metanoia as changing our way of thinking, aligning ourselves more with the worldview that Jesus preached. Today we would consider this to be more of a conversion or transformation.

In the passage we just read, we heard about God seeking out the one lost sheep. Then we heard about a woman searching for a lost coin, reputedly of great value. In both images, we assume God plays the part of the shepherd and woman. Traditionally, we look upon the lost as sinful; both the sheep and coin repent from their sinful ways and return to the fold.

But think about it. Can a sheep be sinful? How about a coin? Is that quarter in your pocket capable of sinning? How about repenting? And if that could even be the case, why would they do so if they were already with God? Woops, did God fall asleep at the switch? Hmm.

I will admit, my little cat Felix sometimes willingly beats up on his cat sister Chidi. I can see the wheels turning in his head as he stalks, then pounces. I suppose a case could be made for the sheep. But more likely, sheep wandering away may simply be looking for food, or falling off some rocky ledge or being attacked by a predator.

But the coin? To my knowledge, coins do not have agency. Otherwise, we may have to worry about their jingling in a pocket. Is there a mini revolution going on in my jacket?

Let's assume the sheep and coin represent people—God wants them back. Period. They belong to God, and God will not stop searching until they return. It's God's grace that keeps us close. Repentance, in the familiar sense, may happen or not. But return will not occur without God actively seeking.

Let's look at some examples we may have experienced.

Returning to my cat Felix. I am constantly watching open doors at the house to thwart an escape. So far so good. All noses have been accounted for. But who among us does not panic when a pet gets lost. Perhaps Princess got out from an unattended door; Barney may have jumped out of the car window without his leash, or Blake broke through a fence and runs loose. How many signs have we seen for lost pets – a happy animal picture with instructions for recovery – phone numbers, sometimes rewards or instructions not to startle the animal.

Far worse, a lost child. May I speak for many adults? Once as a young child, my daughter wandered away from me while at Shopko. In less than a minute, I couldn't find her. I panicked, thinking the worst. I searched my immediate environs; no unattended kids. I went to the front of the store; not outside. Minutes later, she laughingly emerged from behind a rack of clothing – an instant game of hide and seek. Sinful? No. Terrifying? Absolutely!!

Amber alerts scare all of us. The idea that, in an instant, a child may be taken or simply runs away. There's no sin involved; they're lost and we desperately search until they're found. Fortunately, laws now help us search by giving us details to watch for. Of course, immediately prayer doesn't hurt!

Today we recall the events of 9/11, 21 years ago. God certainly cried in horror. We watched unspeakable events on television. I heard something on the radio on my way to work—surely a small plane tragically flew off course. The surreal vision of a plane intentionally flying into an American tower, leaving a smoldering imprint shocked us. How was that possible? It could not be real! Later the collapse of two skyscrapers further tore up our souls. We dreaded the attack on our safety and sovereignty.

God responded immediately. Firefighters, police, office managers searched for anyone who needed help. They ran to co-workers, ushering them to elevators until stairwells became the only egress. They carried firehoses up countless stairs, looking for those blocked from escape. They drove ambulances around building shards raining down in the streets. For many, it was a one-way trip, yet it didn't matter. They sought the lost even if it meant losing their own lives. Repentance not required. God's image was on everyone involved, even the terrorist pilots.

Last year, some of the 3,000-plus kids who lost their parents described their lives twenty years later. Some follow in their parent's footsteps, working in financial firms, to restore a sense of closeness. Some spent their lifetimes fearing the loss of their other parent. Some firms granted full college tuition to the children of lost employees—regardless of their course of study. One young woman angrily regrets that her father did not get on the elevator, guiding others ahead of himself. A young firefighter lost his dad at the Pentagon. He now seeks further training as a social worker to help other rescue workers deal with PTSD, much as his dad had done. Some were not even born yet and became celebrity “9/11 babies.” No wonder they shun any memorials, seeking normalcy rather than the object of others' sympathies.

We, too, have the ability to return the lost. I'm not talking about a modern-day tent revival. It's simply looking around to see who needs help. We do it now:

- It's hard to miss the “Blessing Box” after parking your car in our lot.
- We cook meals every month for NEW Community Shelter.
- JOSHUA, the Justice Organization Sharing Hope United for Action, takes on many social issues—public transportation, justice for the incarcerated, reducing evictions, etc. Union has supported them for years.
- The Jubilee House serves families needing housing, right in our backyard.
- Our members serve on any number of public charities, giving ourselves for the benefits of others.

The Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ strives to seek the lost, too. They—actually, we—are expanding resources through Catalyst Grants, granting churches “seed money” to try out new outreach programs. In fact, that is how we got the Brain Center and On the Mark Dyslexia Clinic. Churches can apply for grants to try new ideas that somehow help out people in their community. We look for partnerships between churches and community organizations. In fact, it could happen in reverse. An organization may approach any UCC church as a partner in restoring wholeness to its community.

The UCC sees hope in simply trying a project. We know that not all projects work. We have to expect failures as learning experiences. Union applied for a grant to set up a community incubator—office space for projects that need a nurturing start. We’ve had two of them, so far. The Brain Center provided a vital resource to Green Bay, even if we no longer see them on a daily basis. In fact, is that not the definition of an incubator project? It grew and moved on. We just need another organization to jump into the incubator. Heaven knows that On the Mark is working—over 60 kids served this past summer and still a waiting list!

The Catalyst Grant program has been operating for several years. All over the state of Wisconsin, 62 churches have received up to \$5,000 to get a program off the ground. We stress community partnerships, attention to social justice needs or simply awareness raising on difficult topics. Food banks are particularly popular, always in concert with other community groups. One community transformed an unused room into a community clothes closet, helping anyone in need. A church in Milwaukee established an Art and Science Camp for underprivileged inner-city children. Hundreds of kids took part in weekly day camp sessions. One church used the funds to underwrite a musical composition. I will admit, I was less than enthused on this request. I thought it was an expensive way to promote native justice when only relatively few people would hear it. After lengthy discussion, the Catalyst team finally approved the grant.

Was I wrong! Here this excerpt from the Milwaukee Journal, dated May 9, 2022.

Composer Raven Chacon has won the 2022 Pulitzer Prize in music for a composition that Milwaukee’s Present Music premiered in 2021.

Chacon’s “Voiceless Mass” was commissioned by the Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ, Plymouth Church UCC and Present Music. Present Music premiered it at its annual Thanksgiving-themed concert in November 2021 at the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist.

In its citation, the Pulitzer jury called “Voiceless Mass” “a mesmerizing, original work for organ and ensemble that evokes the weight of history in a church setting, a concentrated and powerful musical expression with a haunting visceral impact.”

I’m glad I joined the Catalyst team. Thankfully God nudged us doubters past our “Pharisee moment” to see another opportunity to serve. Next time you see a protester carrying a sign imploring you to “Repent for the end is at hand,” look around you. How can we recover the lost among us? Would your service group like to try a project, but needs a grant to get started? How

might our church minister to youth, the elderly, the homeless, the hungry, the refugee, the migrant, the addicted, those with special needs, the unemployed, the prisoner, communities plagued by violence and despair?

Forget the revival tent. Let's just join God in searching for where we can help.

Transformation? May it be so. Amen.

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Luke 15:1-10
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