

# Repent

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones

First Central Congregational UCC

13 March 2011

This Lent we have selected the worship theme “Hearts That Open.” The phrase comes from the covenant of First Central Congregational Church, which you can find inside the front cover of the black hymnals.

We are thankful for life, for Jesus Our Lord, for the courage and vision of our church founders. In gratitude, we covenant with God and with one another, seeking as a church and as individuals to be faithful to God’s will. We pray for hearts that open, minds that understand, and lives that serve.

Often during Lent individuals and churches focus on spiritual practices as part of examining and preparing ourselves for Holy Week and Easter. Fasting, giving something up, is most common. But really one can experience Lent by taking on or strengthening any of the spiritual disciplines, including study, prayer, meditation, etc.

At the time we were considering Lenten worship themes, this church family had been experiencing an increased amount of illness, grief, loss of jobs, and other personal crises of varying kinds. So, we decided to focus on the spiritual and communal practices of care – how we as a church community care for one another. It is something that I think this church is pretty good at. As a newcomer I’ve been impressed with the way you respond. For example, more than once, when we’ve recruited people to supply dinners to members home recovering from surgery, the person being helped has called the church office to tell us not to send any more food because their fridge and freezer are now full.

As we reflect on practices of care, I hope that as part of your personal Lenten devotion, you will choose to engage in some extra or new opportunities of caring for your fellow human beings.

And here’s one for you. Over the next few weeks Jim Harmon, who visits our members in nursing homes and senior living centers and those at home unable to get to church, will himself be recovering from knee surgery. So, the Congregational Care Ministry, chaired by Pat Lange, is going to be lining up congregants to fill the gaps in visiting and contacting the folk on Jim’s list. If you’d like to participate in this ministry opportunity, please see Pat during the coffee hour.

So, with all that in mind, the opening Sunday of Lent brings us these assigned lectionary texts – the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness by Satan and a portion of the story of Eve, Adam, and the serpent in the Garden of Eden. These are rich stories with lots of different interpretative potential. In fact, one could easily get lost following all sorts of tangents in these

stories. The problem confronting me as a preacher this week was how to focus in on these texts with this theme of “Hearts That Open.” These are normally really good First Sunday of Lent texts, leading us to examine our choices and how we confront temptation. But I have to admit that I struggled with them this week.

I looked back at what I had preached three years ago when these texts were last assigned by the lectionary. That’s often a helpful exercise. Three years ago I preached on the character of Satan. I opened quoting John Milton:

So farewell hope, and with hope farewell fear,  
Farewell remorse! All good to me is lost;  
Evil, be thou my good.

That sermon from three years ago wasn’t going to be much help with “Hearts that Open.”

What spiritual and communal practice of care might these stories suggest to us? What I finally zeroed in on is repentance.

How, might you ask, is repentance an act of care? Well, Barbara Brown Taylor, who is a prolific author and now a retired Episcopal priest living in rural Georgia, describes repentance in quite a helpful way:

Repentance begins with the decision to return to relationship: to accept our God-given place in community, and to choose a way of life that increases life for all members of that community.

So, the first act required if we are to care for one another is to choose a way of life in community where we must care for each other.

Choosing this way of life sounds simple and straightforward. But we know that it is, in fact, quite difficult. After all, we live in a world where terrorists blow up buildings and gunmen murder little girls visiting their congresswoman. Reflecting on the Garden of Eden story and the layers of interpretation it has accumulated over the centuries helps us to come to terms with a truth about our humanity.

In this story the woman, Eve, eats not out of stupidity or ignorance, but because the fruit is “desired to make one wise.” Aristotle wrote that “All men, by nature, desire to know.” It is this noble, very human, impulse that drives Eve. Adam, on the other hand, who has been standing there all along not talking, simply eats because she hands it to him.

The human urge for knowledge and wisdom comes into conflict with our all too human limitations. We can pursue knowledge in order to cure cancer or in order to build a better atomic weapon. Our desire for wisdom is arbitrary and risky. Our desire to gain more knowledge can also be what dooms us.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes that this story in the Garden of Eden is “wonderful,”

. . . not because there are no problems in it but because it tells the truth about the way things really are. We really are free to make disastrous decisions. Our choices really do have consequences. And there really are some flaws in the whole setup, whether they

come in the form of talking snakes or in the form of this almost biological urge we have to choose things that we know are ruinous for us and for the whole creation.

And that truth about the way things are includes what she describes as a “deep down” experience which she thinks we all have and that we all must come to terms with:

Deep down in human existence, there is an experience of being cut off from life. There is some memory of having been treated cruelly, and – a little deeper, perhaps – the memory of having treated someone else cruelly as well. Deep down in human existence there is an experience of seeing the light and turning away from it, either because it is too beautiful to behold or because it spoils the dank but familiar darkness. Deep down in human existence there is an experience of reaching for forbidden fruit, of pushing away loving arms, of breaking something on purpose just to prove that you can. Deep down in human existence there is an experience of doing whatever is necessary to feed and comfort the self, because there is no one else to trust, no other purpose to serve, no other god to follow.

It is this “deep down experience,” which we have all had, which the story in Genesis and its layers of possible meaning helps to remind us of. Our actions can break relationships, rupture the bonds of creation, and alienate us from ourselves, from God, from other people, and from the wider creation.

This story calls us to measure, in Taylor’s words, “the full distance between where we are and where God created us to be – to suffer the distance, to name it, to decide not to live quietly with it any longer—that is the moment when we . . . begin to decide who we will be tomorrow.”

So, we are prompted to consider how the choices we humans make individually and collectively run counter to community and caring for one another. Then we must make the commitment to live differently and work to change society so that it is more caring and life-affirming. But the difficult part comes not so much in making the conscious choice, but in putting that decision into action. We are limited by the circumstances of our lives and by our own psychological, biological, and spiritual limitations.

But, Taylor points out, sometimes we get in the way of our own repentance. In an odd way, sometimes we humans prefer to feel bad about what we’ve done rather than take the steps to make it right. Here’s what she says:

[Repentance, choosing a way of life that increases life for all members of the community,] often involves painful changes, which is why most of us prefer remorse to repentance. We would rather say, “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I feel really, really awful about what I have done,” than actually start doing things differently. As a wise counselor once pointed out to me, our chronic guilt is the price we are willing to pay in order to avoid change. We believe that if we feel badly enough about what we are doing, then we may continue doing it. Plus, the guilt itself is so exhausting that it drives us right back into the arms of our sins, which may provide us with our only reliable comfort.

So, if you've been wondering what to give up this year for Lent? Give up guilt. Give up remorse. Give up feeling bad. Give up focusing on yourself.

And in the place of these things, join us in praying for Hearts that Open. Commit yourself to caring for others, and take on at least one new goal. Tell people that you love them. Pray for other people. Smile at strangers. Write more thank you notes. Visit the elderly. Help a child. Feed the hungry. Advocate on behalf of the oppressed. Work to make a better world. Repent!