

Each of the parables in Luke 15 end with heaven and the angels rejoicing “over one sinner who repents”. In the first parable, Jesus uses the example of a shepherd who leaves the flock to find a single lost sheep. Repentance is the focus of our discussion about self-control today. ‘Repentance’ is a word that derives from the Latin word for ‘turn around’. In Greek, the word is ‘metanoia’; and in Hebrew the word is ‘teshuva’. Self-control, then, has something to do with recognizing when our path has strayed from the way of Christ, desiring to gain the wisdom necessary to ‘turn-around’ in order to return to the better way.

Think of the little sheep that has wandered from the herd in our parable. Note that it is Jesus who goes looking for the sheep. Out of love for the one, Jesus leaves the many to find the one who has wandered off the path. As with last week, just as God’s gift of freedom precedes our self-control, so here we see Jesus’ seeking after us, God’s looking for us, precedes our repentance, our turning back and returning to God.

Romans 2 puts it this way: *Do you not realize God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?* The kindness of God, the steadfast love and lovingkindness of God in Psalm 51, guides us to turn toward God. Jesus’ love of the one sheep goes out looking for the sheep and it is in the welcome and gathering up of the sheep that allows the sheep to repent, to turn around, to return to the fold of Christ.

See, we can only know it is God’s goodness and love seeking us out because the presence of the Holy Spirit gives us the sensibility to recognize God’s presence. We see God and Christ because God and Christ first saw us. It sounds like a circular argument, but it is really a mystical, spiritual truth. We need to resist overthinking the logical outcomes and processes. God wants us to know he is always looking for us. God wants us to know the Holy Spirit, if we have accepted her presence in our lives, is always seeking reunion, reconciliation and return to the ways of God.

Repentance requires some rigorous self-reflection, however. It means recognizing, more often than not, we are wandering, scattered beings who do not even know we are searching for freedom, truth and salvation. The prophet Ezekiel knew this when the Lord spoke through him, saying: *they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. 6My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them (Ez 34:6)*. Rather than assuming we are already in God’s good hands, we must constantly be vigilant of the likelihood that we have deceived ourselves and are in fact drifting away from God.

I will use myself as an example here. I like to think I am a pretty disciplined person. When I need to concentrate, I think I can do it pretty well. For a good long while, I had a

program in my internet browser on my computer that would tally up the time spent on websites. It aggregates your total time and then breaks out how much time you spend on each website you go to. So, several months ago, I was working on preparing for Sunday. To do that, I read articles; I study Scripture; I look at commentaries; I think and pray and wonder. Some of that time requires internet time, because literally thousands of years of historical writing is available out there. It is a beautiful thing. But there is also a lot of junk.

I was in a coffee shop for the morning, because, for me, a little distraction is a good thing. I get more done when stuff is happening around me. So I decided to look at the little program on my web browser. I was horrified. FaceBook, e-mail, news sites, celebrity tracking sites, fashion - of course. Over the space of a couple hours, a good quarter of my time was spent on extraneous, useless surfing. I don't know, maybe I can justify it by saying an active, jumpy mind is a creative, seeking mind, but I don't really think that is true. A distracted mind is a distracted soul. I was like Martha in the kitchen, while Mary sat at Jesus' feet.

I solved the problem in a creative manner. I deleted the tracking program. What I no longer know is no longer relevant.

Our need for repentance requires the acceptance that we wander, we fall away, we do not pay attention. Repentance, Pastor John Piper says, is "*not just being sorry - it is following through on conviction...so you are no longer at odds with God but in sync with God*". Repentance means coming back into the way of God, returning to the flow of the easy and gentle yoke of Christ.

I felt a personal sense of failure and sorrow at my lack of attention to the work I was trying to do that day in the coffee shop, but I did not have any conviction about that sensibility. I felt sorry but I did not repent. I suspect, in fact, I know, many of you are like I am. It is so much easier to just delete the program, to just stop doing the things which might implicate you in a life out of sync with God. That feeling of anxiety which follows us like a cloud and calls you out on every little thing? Perhaps that is the feeling of being out of sync with God. Perhaps that feeling is the Holy Spirit pulling you back into alignment with the ways of Jesus Christ. Perhaps that is the feeling of Jesus seeking one of his lost sheep.

The prophet Isaiah says: *For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength (Is 30:15)*. In returning, in repentance, is our salvation. Self-control is the awareness of our need to repent. In turning around and allowing Christ to carry us back to the fold is our liberation, our freedom.

Do we really want it, though? Do we really want what repentance provides? The Psalmist says in Psalm 51, a song of repentance: *Restore in me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit (Ps 51:12)*. Notice the willing spirit here is not one that seeks self-control - self-control is a thing we already have by the grace of the Holy Spirit - the willing spirit is one that seeks the joy and peace of a loving and steadfast God. The joy of God is like, as Jesus says, a man who discovers a great treasure in a field and, upon discovering it, spends everything he has in order to buy the field. Are we like that man? Are we willing to 'turn around', to repent, and claim what God has given us?

Taken in this way, repentance is a beautiful thing. The self-control of the Holy Spirit calls us into a life defined by turning around to God and turning away from what takes us from God. In mystical Judaism, the possibilities of repentance (*teshuva*) are cosmic and global in the act. Rabi Judah Loewe says: "...when people undertake *teshuva* (repentance) and return to their beginnings, the world too returns to its beginning, to restore and repair every ruined thing in the world" ([www.jewishideasdaily.com/712/features/repentance-freedom/](http://www.jewishideasdaily.com/712/features/repentance-freedom/). An article by Yehuda Mirsky).

This is the clean heart which Psalm 51 speaks of. A clean heart is one which has identified with the far-reaching love of God, the love which seeks to transform everything and align the entire world to the promise of the Kingdom of God. This is why Paul can say: *So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!* (2 Cor 5:17). Think about that for a moment. Imagine the implications. Our repentance, our turning toward God, literally recreates the world - not because we do it, but because we have now aligned ourselves to the work of the Holy Spirit within us, which is always aligned with God's great plan for Creation. A clean heart, a repentant heart, is a global heart, is a heart which seeks the wandering sheep even as she knows herself as a wandering sheep.

We can only have this sensibility if we listen to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. If we understand deeply what has happened in our own repentance, baptism and call to live in Christ, we will understand that *we no longer regard anyone from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we no longer know him that way* (2 Cor 5:16). This is liberation talk. This is freedom speech. And remember, the outcome of freedom is self-control. (*As an aside, since today is Veteran's Day, I feel justified in saying another word for self-control is personal responsibility. Because of the freedom we have as a nation, and a freedom which has been secured for us by those who have fought for and protected it, we have a personal responsibility to act and respect that freedom. This is another way of speaking about self-control*). Self-control means knowing that in Christ, we are liberated from identifying with earthly things. It means allowing ourselves to experience the constant and unending *renewal of the mind* (Rom 12:2) the Holy Spirit is constantly engendering in our walk with Christ.

Repentance, then, does not mean living one's life in one direction, doing something wrong and then continuing in the same direction. That is guilt. That is false security. It is not a way of peace, freedom and salvation. Repentance means 'turning around'; doing a 180; coming to the fork in the road, taking either road at the fork, going down that road and then turning all the way around and coming back to the fork in the road. Only then can we be liberated from the *human point of view* Paul speaks of.

To see from a Christ-centered point of view means being liberated from our identification with the tribe I understand myself to be a part of. I am not the Caucasian, Welsh 21st century man. Those identities are taken up and transformed by Christ. It may not change my appearance or my history, but it will change how I understand and define that history. To see from a Christ-centered point of view means being liberated from the political party I identify with. I am not a Republican, an Independent or a Democrat. I may vote that way, but those identities are taken

up by Christ and transformed into an active, world aware Christian who cares about seeing Christ's presence in this world right now. To see from a Christ-centered point of view means being liberated from our identification with sex and sexuality. I am not the sex I have with another person. I am not my sexual orientation. Those are taken up and transformed by my life in Christ. It may not change what I do, but it will change how I know myself when I do it. I may be a member of a Christian church in a Christian denomination in a secular state in a country swirling with religious identities. But in a Christ-centered worldview, I am not the denomination I follow. I am not the church I belong to. I am not even a separate religious movement. All those identities are taken up by Christ and transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit in me, in you, so we can be liberated from worldly designations and be people who are identified by a singular relationship. We are lovers of God and followers of God's Son, who is the preeminent image, the example and the cause of what we believe to be true - we are Christ-followers.

This is what the Holy Spirit does to and for us. She gives us the strength, the vision and the awareness to turn around and align *again, one more time*, with the God who loves, saves and cares for us and all of Creation.

What is taking you away from God? What is distracting you from your walk with Christ? Do you want the freedom the Lord is offering us today? Do you want the Holy Spirit to work within you? Do you love God? These are repentance questions. If we answer *Yes* to one or all of them, we are being called to 'turn around', to repent.

The clean heart, the baptised life in Christ is a life made free by Jesus Christ. A life of freedom is one that knows the need for constant repentance. Right there is the essence of self-control - the recognition of the need for repentance. And self-control understands that we are already free and loved by God. Paul says in Ephesians 4: *You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:20-24).*

Our repentance, our acceptance of our freedom in Christ, our trust in the fruits of the Holy Spirit create us according to the likeness of God. We are restored to God's joy and God's creative work. We stand at the precipice then of God's great work in the world, as inheritors of the Kingdom of God and as Ambassadors of Christ, to proclaim God's *steadfast love and abundant mercy, which cleanses us of all iniquity and sin (Ps 51:1).*

Our repentance, then, born as it is in the wrong paths we are always wandering down, built as it is upon the distractions we constantly give into, born as it is in the sorrow of our acknowledged failure to live deeply into the fruits of life we have been given through Jesus Christ, is really an opportunity to come back to the great joy and comfort and promise God has for each and every one of us. The fruit of self-control becomes the pathway back to the love of God.

Isaiah has a beautiful image for what a fruit-filled, repentant, Christ-following, God-loving, self-controlled person looks like. They look like an Ambassador of a great nation and king. They look like one who has inherited a vast and wealthy kingdom. They look like someone

who has been claimed by a father that one left in anger and fear, a prodigal son and daughter.

Isaiah says of those people: *How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'* (Is 52:7). Amen.