

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand

Matthew 4:12-17

Lake shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

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The pastor of my childhood and youth was a self-educated former village blacksmith named Jerry Schmucker. I loved Brother Schmucker, and he had a great impact on my life. But I have to say in all honesty that he was one of the worst preachers I ever heard. I once compared his preaching voice to a circular saw hitting a nail embedded in a 2x4.

He had fun with sermon titles, I will give him that. Remember the Old Testament story about the prophet who told an army general to dip in the Jordan River seven times and he would be healed of leprosy? Brother Schmucker's sermon on that text was titled, "Seven Ducks in a Muddy Creek."

Brother Schmucker was a devotee of expository preaching; that is, he worked his way tediously through a text verse after verse after verse. It is the least imaginative way to approach a text, but sometimes it is the most efficient way. For example, the simplest way to deal with our text – "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near" -- is to dissect it word by word and phrase by phrase, which is what we will do.

Repent. Amy-Jill Levine, the outstanding Jewish New Testament scholar, who teaches at a Christian divinity school (Vanderbilt Divinity School), says that repentance "*is not simply a matter of saying we are sorry for doing the sinful thing or failing to do the right thing, but it is a matter of . . . getting off the wrong path and getting on to the right path.*" (*Sermon on the Mount*, p. xiii).

I like her emphasis that repentance isn't simply a matter of saying you're sorry.

From childhood we were taught that saying you're sorry will cover a multitude of sins, even if those words were said under heavy duress.

"You broke your sister's favorite toy. Don't you feel bad?"

'No, not really.'

"Tell her you're sorry. Tell her you're sorry or no TV tonight."

'I'm sorry.'

As Amy-Jill Levine points out repentance is not simply about feeling bad or apologizing. It's about changing.

The baptism of John was predicated on repentance, changing one's behavior. But John had some specific things in mind when he called people to repent. He told tax collectors to stop collecting more money than people owed. Some unscrupulous tax collectors were getting rich that way. He told soldiers to stop extorting money from citizens by threatening them with violence.

To ordinary folks who came to him for baptism he said, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Someone must have objected, "I just came to get saved. What does giving away my second coat have to do with repentance?" John probably answered, "Giving away your second coat is repentance."

To repent means to recalibrate one's priorities, values, and commitments, in short, to reorient one's life.

The kingdom of heaven. Jesus called on his listeners to repent, to reorient their lives in light of the kingdom of heaven.

For Jesus the kingdom of heaven was where the will of God was done. He taught his disciples to pray, “*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth . . .*”

Once he was asked by religious scholars when the kingdom was coming, and he answered, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.” (Luke 17:20-21) Or within you or between you. The kingdom is where God’s will is done on earth.

He once sent his disciples on a preaching mission with these instructions: “*Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.*” Then he told them to say, “*The kingdom of heaven has come near.*” (Matthew 10:7-8) Where ministry is offered to the sick, the troubled, the bereaved, there the will of God is done, there the work of the kingdom is done.

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is . . .” What comes next? For me, this is key. There is a single Greek word that the New Revised Standard Version translates “*has come near.*” “*The kingdom of heaven has come near.*” The older Revised Standard Version, as well as other versions, translated that word “*is at hand.*” “*The kingdom of heaven is at hand.*” It is my impression that it could go either way.

I opt for “*the kingdom of heaven is at hand,*” largely because of its slipperiness. What does it mean to say that something is “at hand”? Is it here? No, not exactly. It’s not distant either. It’s close. So close you can almost touch it. But it isn’t quite here. It’s at hand.

Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is “at hand.” It is as close as the next moment. It is as close as the next thing that happens.

The thing about the kingdom of heaven – where the will of God is done --is that it always “at hand.” It was “at hand” 2,000 years ago when Jesus said it; it is “at hand” today.

That’s why we have to be ready.

What can we do to be ready? Circle back to the beginning: Repent, reorient one’s life, one’s awareness, and sensitivity, because the opportunity to do the work of the kingdom, the will of God, might present itself at any moment.

Which, as Brother Schmucker would say, leads me to a story.

A couple of weeks ago, Nikki, my wife, who is the minister of missions at the First Baptist Church of Winston-Salem, was asked to write a piece for an on-line site that the church maintains. She chose to write about an incident that took place a year or so ago, before the pandemic.

Before she wrote the piece, she told me the story. I listened with great interest, because I knew then that I would be preaching on “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” today. Oh my gosh, I thought when I heard the story – that is it!

Here is her story, which I tell advisedly and under her watchful eye. (She is sitting right there.)

You need to know a couple of things. First, as I said in an earlier sermon, we live downtown, about two blocks from the church, and Nikki usually walks to the office. Second, Nikki has lived in the neighborhood for more than 25 years.

She began her story: “I walk our neighborhood streets a lot, meaning the streets that are in the downtown area right around our church. I feel quite proud of how I know to navigate these streets. I am not scared. I know when and where it is safe to walk. I know who and what to avoid.”

“I love the fact that I have been able to walk to work in my neighborhood my whole professional life. And my job at First Baptist on Fifth allows me to continue with this routine.”

One afternoon, when she was walking to the church, Nikki saw a woman sitting in the grass beside the sidewalk and two men huddled around her. They were young and had the appearance of street people. The woman seemed to be in distress.

Nikki said, “Quite reflexively and instinctively, relying on my acquired street savvy skills, I started crossing the street to avoid” them.

She said that about halfway across the street, “I heard what is perhaps that still small voice or my guilty conscience, saying, ‘What are you doing? What are you thinking? You are on your way to church, for goodness sake! Could you be any more the embodiment of the Levite who crossed to the other side of the road to avoid the man on the ground in the Good Samaritan story?’”

So out of guilt or just not wanting to be the Levite in the story, I crossed back over and walked up to the group.”

“How can I help?”

It was a very hot day, and one of the men said that the woman had become ill, possibly overcome by the heat. They needed to get her home, but they did not have enough money for transportation.

Nikki had some money on her. She gave it to them.

She wrote, “There was something in their manner of receiving -- their warmth, their gratitude -- that washed over me. ‘God bless you,’ they said. In that moment, the kingdom of heaven was there, for all of us . . . right on the streets of downtown Winston-Salem.”

Nikki concluded, “What is it that Jesus said, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand’? That is why we need to be ready, because we don’t know when it will come. I almost missed it.”

Repent, Jesus said, reorient your way of being in the world – or on your neighborhood streets -- because the kingdom of heaven is at hand. It is always at hand.