

**WHEN RELATIONSHIPS GO SOUTH:
MAKE A U-TURN
MATTHEW 3:1-17
JANUARY 13, 2013**

We've just passed Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's.

But did you know that Friday was Human Trafficking Awareness Day?

The calendar is just full of special days that some of us do not find all that special.

We usually are aware only if it's a day off of work.

January 18-25 is the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

February is Black History Month and Hispanic Heritage Month.

February 10 is Transfiguration Day.

There's a Women's History Month, World Malaria Day, World AIDS Day,

Reformation Day, Grandparent's Day, St. Patrick's Day,

National Bible Week, and Groundhog Day.

We are currently in the little known church season called Epiphany.

That's a fancy theological word meaning "revealing" or "making known."

While Advent focuses on Christ coming into the world at Christmas and at his second coming,

and Christmas focuses on Jesus' birth,

Epiphany focuses on his being made known to the world.

Traditionally it is marked by the stories of the star and the magi coming to visit,

Jesus being spotted by Simeon and Anna at the temple,

and today the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist.

Jesus' baptism was a moment of epiphany because

the Spirit of God descended on Jesus

and the voice of God the Father identified him as the Son of God.

And, by the way, John the *Baptist* is not a reference to a Christian denomination.

John was a Jewish prophet,

but was doing something very new for Jews.

Water baptism was something that a Gentile had to undergo if they were to convert to Judaism.

It symbolized washing away the stain and sin of being a Gentile,

the death of the old Gentile person and the rising to life of a new Jew.

But here comes John,

insisting that JEWS needed to be baptized, too!

It wasn't just a matter of washing off the Gentile in order to become a Jew,

but washing off sin in order to come to God.

And just being born and raised a Jew does not mean you're without sin.

Being born and raised in the church does not mean you're a Christian.

Everybody's marked by sin,

so everybody needs cleaning up.

It was really quite shocking to Jewish sensibilities.

MATTHEW 3:1-17

John called people to a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

A baptism of repentance.

Repent.

There's a word you only hear in church,

or in popular caricatures of revival preachers.

But it's a biblical word with real meaning.

The word in the original Greek of the New Testament is *metanoia*, meta-noia.

It means a change of mindset.

How many of you have ever ridden a horse?

When you want a horse to turn,
 what do you do?
 You pull the reins to one side,
 that turns the horse's head,
 and that turns the whole horse.

That is repentance.

If you really, truly turn your head, change your mind,
 you will turn your whole life.

To repent is to commit yourself to real changes that mean a different direction for life.
 Repentance is one of those things that is essential if a broken relationship is to be put back together.

If a husband has done wrong to his wife, or vice versa,
 it's not enough to just say, "I'm sorry. Please forgive me."
 That's a start.

But real reconciliation requires a commitment to *not do it again!*

Forgiveness is not about letting you off the hook
 so you can do repeat your wrongdoing.

That's the pattern in many abusive relationships.

He hits her, then says he's sorry, and sounds very remorseful.
 She forgives, and they stay together.

But one day the pressure builds and he hits her again, only worse.
 Followed by more remorse, more apologies, forgiveness,
 and later another more severe repeat of the cycle.

Sadly, physical abuse cycles almost always escalate
 until the woman leaves,
 either because she finally had enough and got out
 or she left in a body bag.

Ladies, if that's your situation, get out of it now.
 If you have children, get them out of it, too.
 Even if they're not being beaten,
 they're learning that behavior.

Abusers make use of a false cycle of
 remorse and forgiveness without any real repentance.

It is not enough to say, "I'm sorry."

There's got to be real repentance if a relationship is to be healed.

If someone cheated,

there's got to be a solid commitment to not repeat that act of betrayal.
 Followed, of course, by a substantial period of time spent in
 proving your trustworthiness.

After a deep betrayal and hurt, trust is not just given.
 It's got to be earned.

You've got to "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance."

You've got to live out the commitment you made
 and prove that it's real,
 prove that your mind is really changed.

If a lie was told,

if money was foolishly squandered,

if a confidentiality was betrayed,
 if one was never any help to the other,
 if hurtful words were spoken,
 of course, forgiveness is a necessary step.
 But there's got to be a real commitment to a U-turn,
 a change of direction in life.
 And then you have to really live out that commitment.
 You have to actually live a different direction.

For the biggest U-turns,
 I'd suggest a lot of prayer
 and an accountability partner
 who will regularly check in with you to see who you're doing.

John's was a baptism of repentance.

It was about patching up a broken relationship with God.
 Those who came to be baptized by him realized there was something missing from their lives.
 They realized they were not completely right with God.
 They were making a public proclamation that
 they wanted to change the direction of their lives.
 They wanted to turn away from sin and turn toward God.

And with that, they were assured their sins were forgiven.
 In fact, it was the proclamation of forgiveness that freed them to confess and repent.
 If you're afraid God will zap you for your sins,
 why would you ever bring those sins out in the open?
 But if forgiveness is offered,
 God has opened the door for confession and repentance.

It was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.
 And on the other side of that baptism,
 forgiveness of sins is not a license to go on sinning
 without fearing God's judgment of that sin.
 There's that repentance piece that means
 you are *continually* choosing that U-turn,
 away from sin and back toward God.

But not everyone takes baptism seriously.

Every now and then I'll get a phone call from someone who is not an attender at any church,
 but they "want to get the baby done."

Yes, really: "get the baby done."

Then I have to explain

 we only baptize the children of active church members,
 and we do it in the context of Sunday worship.

I tell them that baptism is not water with some magic whammy in it.

 It's the relationship with Christ that matters.
 So the parents of the child to be baptized must make promises
 to raise their child in the church and the faith,
 so their child will have every opportunity, when they are able,
 to accept Christ for themselves and live a life of faith.

And the congregation promises to be a loving, Christ-like community
 that helps in that effort.

Because ultimately, for that baptism to have long lasting meaning,
 that child has to respond to what Christ has done for them.

The baptism pictures the washing away of sin,
 or the death and burial of the sinner,
 and the start of a new life.

But that child needs to be grasped by that reality and live it out one day.

So we ask that parents be active members of a church before their child is baptized,
 so they are already displaying their commitment to Christ and his church.

Nine times out of ten, the caller simply says "Oh," and hangs up the phone.

When an older child, a youth, or an adult comes to be baptized,

they should be aware of what it means,

and come with the intention of living out the meaning of their baptism
 from that day forward.

It is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

That is what *your* baptism means.

Are you taking it seriously?

Are you living out a U-turn?

Turning from sin and turning back to God,

depending on his forgiveness of past sins

and seeking to live differently today and tomorrow?

It is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

But why did Jesus undergo this baptism?

The Bible says he "was tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin." (He.4:15)

Jesus was without sin,

which means he didn't need to repent, to be forgiven, or to be cleansed.

So why did he come to be baptized?

We get a clue from something the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth:

"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us,

so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2Cor.5:21)

He had no sin of his own,

but he took our sins onto himself.

Jesus, from the very beginning of his ministry identified himself with sinners,
 with you and me and every other sinner around here.

He identified so deeply with us as sinners that

Paul says God made him to be sin for us.

So when Jesus died on the cross,

he was taking the punishment for sin that we deserved.

God did not turn blind eye to sin.

God did not pretend that the things we think and say and do
 do not really matter.

They matter deeply.

Sin must be accounted for and punished.

And the Bible says "the wages of sin is death." (Ro.6:23)

What began at Jesus' baptism was finished on the cross.

Justice was served, sin was punished.

Which means, if you and I accept that as Christ's gift to us,

we can stand before God forgiven,

as if we were without sin.

He became "sin for us,

so we might become the righteousness of God."

We might become the righteousness of God.

There's the repentance.

The U-turn.

Yes, baptism means God forgives us.

But the moment we accept that gift and put our trust in him,
he also sends his Spirit into our lives.

He empowers us to live out that U-turn,
to live a new life.

And so every morning when we wake up,
in fact, every moment of every day,

we can choose to live that U-turn.

We can choose to turn from sin and toward God.

We can choose to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit.

We can choose to depend on the power of the Holy Spirit.

We can choose to live out our baptism,

each day increasingly dead to sin and alive in Christ.

There was a news report about an Army veteran named John Crabtree.

He had been wounded in Vietnam,

was on permanent disability,

and had been receiving benefits from the government.

One day, out of the blue, he received an official notification from the government
of his own death.

Needless to say, this was quite a shock!

Mr. Crabtree wrote the government a letter stating that

he was indeed very much alive and would like to continue receiving his benefits.

The letter did no good.

He then tried calling the government.

Have you ever tried to call the government?

It's sort of like spitting into the wind.

The phone calls didn't change the situation either.

Finally, as a last resort, he contacted a local television station,
which ran a human-interest story about his situation.

During the interview, the reporter asked him,

"How do you feel about this whole ordeal?"

The veteran chuckled and said,

"Well, I feel a little frustrated by it.

Have you ever tried to prove that you're alive?"

That's a pretty good question for all of us.

Could you prove that you have been baptized and are now alive in Christ?

Is there evidence of you living out a U-turn?

INVITATION TO A RENEWAL OF OUR BAPTISMAL COVENANT

This morning we have the opportunity to renew our baptismal covenant.

Whether you were baptized as an infant and have no memory of it,

or you were baptized as an adult and are still a little wet behind the ears,

it is important that we remember the meaning of our baptism and all that Christ has done for us,
dying to pay for our sins,

so we can be forgiven,

rising from the dead,

so we can have eternal life with him,

and giving us his Spirit,

so we can live a new life right here and now.

And as we remember and give thanks,

we can choose, once again, to live into that baptism,

to make that U-turn away from sin and back toward God.

Maybe there's a specific area of your life needing a U-turn,

or it could be more all-encompassing than that.

Whatever it is, bring it to him today, now.

You are invited to come kneel at the rail in prayer.

If you'll pray with your hands open and up,

someone will come and mark your forehead with water in a sign of the cross.

If you want to remain there is prayer for a moment,

please fold your hands so we know you've already received the water.

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