

“The Joy of Repentance”

Sermon preached by Carmen Garrigan
Associate Pastor for Youth
Kirkmont Presbyterian Church
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Text: Hosea 14

Prayer: Father God, with You there is life and salvation. Apart from You there is no good. You alone have the power to heal and to transform. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we ask that you would speak to our hearts afresh as we hear Your Word this evening. Convict us of our sin and restore to us the joy of Your salvation. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen

For better or worse you might decide, one of the things my husband Sean and I enjoy when we need some effortless entertainment is watching the Simpsons. We record new episodes on Sunday nights while we are at youth group and we have seasons 1-9 that have been released on DVD. One element that has kept the Simpsons successful for 18 years is that the characters remain static. They remained locked in time, never aging and never changing. Nobody grows up and goes to college and Homer will never kick his drinking habit. In addition to making for a long running program, static personalities also reflect the producer Matt Groening’s personal understanding of people. His personal ideology is that people don’t change.

Take Homer Simpson for instance. Deep down he loves his family, but his expressions of love will always remain off target and dysfunctional because of his flawed personality that tends towards selfishness and gluttony.

Or there is Marge Simpson. She genuinely wants to help her family, but tends to nag or revert to grumbling instead of moving towards healthy conflict resolution. She is a compulsive cleaner and doesn’t know what to do with herself when she is not picking up after everyone else.

Bart will always be a rebellious trouble maker and Lisa will always be the fairly functional one in the family though sometimes hindered by her arrogance and pride.

All of the Simpsons’ faults make for dependable laughs and foibles season after season, but think how dismal your outlook on life would be if there really was no hope for you or those in your family to change.

In one sense Matt Groening’s understanding of human nature is right- we all have a propensity toward selfishness and prefer to do what seems right to us rather than what is really true and good. Our Scripture passage this evening reminds us too that our sins have been our downfall. To God we look much like the Simpson family- we repeatedly fall back into our destructive habits and ways all while thinking we are doing the best thing.

Yet in another sense, Matt Groening’s understanding of people is incomplete. It is impossible for us to truly change when it comes to our own effort, but there is hope. We belong to a God that has the power to change human hearts and make us each into a new creation.

The last chapter in Hosea that we read gives us a compelling vision for what it means to let God change us. The book of Hosea is all about how God calls wayward

people back to Himself. At the beginning of the book the prophet Hosea is called by God to go and marry a prostitute. This symbolizes what God has done in His covenant with His people Israel. They are an unfaithful people who have forsaken their first love, but God still choose to pursue them with His love. After they are married, Hosea's wife Gomer runs away from him to lead a life of prostitution. Her sin is her downfall and destruction, yet God tells Hosea to go, buy back his wife and show his love to her again. This demonstrates how God will personally redeem His adulterous people and show His love to them again when they return to Him and seek Him only. The prophet Hosea foretells the destruction and woe that will befall the nation of Israel because of their sinful and idolatrous ways- it will not be a pretty sight. Even so, Hosea concludes with an opportunity for listeners to repent and return to the Lord so that their joy will be restored and so that they can once again experience the full blessing of God's redeeming love.

This message is also the message of Lent. Today, Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent. The early church determined that the Lenten period of fasting and renewal should correspond to Christ's fasting in the wilderness (Matthew 4:2), and by counting forty days back from Easter (excluding Sundays, which remain "feast" days), and arrived at the Wednesday seven weeks before Easter.

At one time Lent was primarily viewed as a period during which new believers prepared for baptism on Easter Sunday, but later the season became a general time of repentance and renewal for all Christians. And so Ash Wednesday became the day that marked the beginning of the Lenten renewal.

During Lent the church, as the people of God, has the opportunity to repent and experience true restoration. As we see to draw near to God during this special season, the message of Hosea is just as true for us as it is for the nation of Israel in Hosea's time. In order to experience the joy and blessing of a restored relationship with God, we must first go to him with humble hearts and genuine repentance. Hosea, through the poetic language of prophecy, outlines for us how to return to God and have our fellowship with Him restored.

First, we are told to take words with us and return to the Lord. Words of confession are at the heart of repentance. Often the people of Israel would attempt to reconcile to God through just offerings, sacrifices, and rituals. When people performed their ritual and offered their sacrifices without confessing their sin and having a contrite heart about what they had been doing wrong, God's anger would burn against them. God wants us to humbly acknowledge our sin to Him and to reject what has been deceiving us before so that we can experience the immense blessing of restoration.

During Lent we can also deceive ourselves into thinking that observance of rituals and the offering of sacrifices will restore our intimacy with God. Let me give you some examples of how I have tried to do this. I don't think that God was pleased. When I was in middle school my Sunday School teacher told us about Lent and encouraged us each to give something up to remember Christ's sacrifice. I decided that I would give up eating meat. I didn't really like it anyway and my sacrifice of something everyone else loves would surely be impressive. Everyone gawked at my tremendous discipline to give up steaks and hamburgers. Obviously my artificial sacrifice didn't help my relationship with God at all. I would have done better to be kind to my parents and to have given up arguing about chores or maybe use my TV time to help others.

Fast forward a few years into college and seminary. Impressive sacrifice now involves dessert. I joined the throng of young women my age who are all giving up desserts and sweets as a discipline to please God. The problem with that resolve is that my birthday usually falls during the first week of Lent. My love for God was somehow

never big enough to exclude the consumption of birthday cake. Though I think my problem was bigger than the timing of my arrival on the planet. God saw through our pretense of piety and likely saw nothing more than our desire to give our diets a God stamp of approval. I would have done better to confess my sins of idolatry in wanting to look like Malibu Barbie and trade trips to the yogurt or ice cream shop for time interceding for the needs of others or volunteering at a local food pantry.

It is my belief that a more beneficial Lenten discipline is to take something on that will draw us closer to God or to legitimately work on an area of sinfulness in our lives. If I struggle with selfishness I should purposefully do things to serve others. If I don't honor God with my finances I could begin tithing. If I am quick to anger I could work on my temper and God honoring ways of reconciliation. I am convinced that sacrifices with no real spiritual value do little to draw us to God. We are better off pursuing the things that actually matter to God. There is at least one student at the University of Dayton that seems to have a good handle on this. His story was in the Dayton Daily Newspaper today.

Last summer Joe Melendrez, a Christian rapper, entered a burrito contest sponsored by Chipotle. The lucky winner would receive three burritos every day for a year, plus four 20-burrito parties, all free of charge.

"I figured if I won I could eat everyday and also feed my friends," said Melendrez, a lean Texan from San Antonio. "Over the summer I developed a strategy to win the contest. Christian rap is something I love to do. I want to do it as a ministry after I graduate. So I created a rap focused around eating burritos." Melendrez won the contest, hands down.

Twenty-one year old Melendrez decided his Lenten act of giving would be to turn his burrito windfall into an outreach to Dayton's homeless. Last Saturday, Melendrez fed free burritos at a party for the homeless and hungry at the Chipotle Mexican Grill on Brown Street.

He comments, "I think your whole life should be a sacrifice — not just during Lent. Rather than saying I'm giving up something for Lent, I'm putting more energy into something for Lent. That's my sacrifice. People are hungry all over the place. At Chipotle we sat down at the table with more than 30 people and interacted with them. We not only fed them but we learned their stories. I believe God is using me to communicate love for his children through a hearty meal at Chipotle."

He also reflectively adds that, "Some people enter a dark period when they go into Lent. It's like they are being punished for something. Lent should be a joyous time and an opportunity for us to look at those areas of our lives that need to be changed."

I couldn't agree more.

True repentance isn't making fancy shows of sacrificing things that don't really matter to God. True repentance calls us to acknowledge to God what our real sins are and the ways that we have been deceived into living for things lesser than God. Hosea then tells us to ask God to forgive our sins and to receive us graciously, realizing that God is not required do so, but that He chooses to forgive us in His free love for us. Repentance also means doing a 180 degree turn from our destructive behavior. If we ask God's forgiveness for something, but go right back to our old ways, then we haven't truly repented. Israel's sin was a failure to trust God for political guidance and protection and the worship of pagan gods. All of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. What ways of destructive or idolatrous behavior do we need to renounce collectively and individually?

You may have noticed that today's sermon title is a bit of an oxymoron. In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis shares that "Repentance is no fun at all. It is much harder than merely eating humble pie. It means unlearning all the self-conceit and self-

will that we have been training ourselves into for thousands of years. It means killing a part of yourself, undergoing a kind of death.” I agree with C.S. Lewis. Repentance is not fun or easy. It is humbling and hard work. Skipping gleefully into God’s presence to admit our wrong doing is definitely not what I am suggesting we do. The joy of repentance comes when we have died to ourselves and have been raised to new life in Christ.

This is the same pattern of our text. After describing what it looks like to genuinely return to the Lord, Hosea beautifully describes the blessing of God’s restoration. Hosea intertwines a number of metaphors to describe what the experience of God’s forgiving love is like. His love is healing. Our waywardness is incurable until God heals our sinful past. Our efforts to amend our ways aren’t sufficient, only God’s forgiving love freely offered has the power we need to be truly changed.

Hosea also describes what God’s restored and reconciled people will be like. We are told that our lives will have an unmistakable freshness to them. Hosea uses imagery of dew, flowers, fragrance, beauty and shade to describe the results of restored intimacy with God. Reconciliation with God also leads to new stability. Hosea describes this reality with the imagery of being rooted like the cedar of Lebanon. Hosea further declares that we will also have renewed vigor like the shoots of a tree’s new growth and the grain of the fields.

The restored people of God are also compared to the famed wine of Lebanon. Instead of being compared to a prostitute who is enjoyed for a night and then discarded, we will be like fine wine that is savored, whose aroma and taste are enjoyed long after it has been drunken. This lets us know that our restoration will not just be a blessing to us, but the goodness of what God has done in our lives will overflow to bless others.

Our experience of God will also be new. No longer will God’s judgment be upon us, but we will know God’s love to be like that of a Father. God also describes Himself as fruitful pine tree- again a mixed metaphor that expresses both God’s constancy and rich abundance.

Finally, Hosea ends with a plea to be wise. Why choose calamity, judgment and destruction over the joyful fruit of repentance. Those who are wise will return to the Lord and walk in His ways.

During this time of Lent and each day, we are extended an incredible offer. We can pursue our own way and have our sins cause our downfall. Or we can return to God with real confession and genuine repentance. God alone can change our faithless ways into a life that joyfully sings His praise. Don’t merely offer God sacrifices or rituals that have no real value. Instead, give Him your heart if you are willing to let it be changed for God’s glory.