“Turning” The Rev. Christine Chakoian
Luke 3:1-18 First Presbyterian Church
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Guilt, I’ve come to believe, is highly underrated in our time. There’s a place for being ashamed of bad behavior, as even my chocolate Lab knows, when she puts herself in her crate after stealing food off the table. Guilt tells us when we’ve crossed the line, and guilt makes us want to make up for the wrongs that we’ve done.[i] Guilt is a powerful motivator, and woe to a culture that does not honor it. As uncomfortable as it feels, guilt sure beats “anything goes,” which eventually leads to utter chaos.

But guilt isn’t what our passage today is about. In our passage, John the Baptist calls not for guilt, but for *repentance,* and that is another matter.

What’s the difference? When we think of the word “repentance,” we often equate it with “remorse” – that negative, shameful feeling that comes when we feel guilt. But the New Testament word that we translate “repentance” is much more than feelings of remorse. That Greek term for repentance, *metanoia,* literally means a “change of mind,”

meta – meaning “change” or “turn,” and
noia – meaning “mind” or “thinking.”

So when John the Baptist says “repent,” he’s not telling us to “feel guilty,” or “have remorse.” He’s telling us to change our mind, to be reoriented, to *look at life differently.* He’s telling us to turn and look at life the way it *might* be, instead of the way it just is. That’s what it means to repent.

And when people ask John what they should do to repent, he shows them how to see things in their daily life that had simply been invisible to them. When the soldiers ask him, “What should we do?” John tells them, don’t shake down the people you’re hired to protect. For so long soldiers had been extorting money that they couldn’t even see it was wrong. And when the tax collectors ask him, “What should we do?” he tells them, don’t take more than is owed the government. For so long tax collectors had been adding their own generous bonuses, they couldn’t imagine it was unfair. And when the crowds ask him, “What should we do?” he tells them, if you have two coats, give one

away. For so long people who had two coats thought of themselves as having just enough for themselves that they couldn't imagine they should give one away.

It makes me wonder what he'd say to us. When rampant corruption is *de rigueur* in Illinois, and when obscene bonuses on Wall Street seem normal, and when not having enough room for your stuff, even with extra closets for out of season clothes, is typical … well, I imagine he'd tell us, just because the world is this way it is doesn't mean it needs to stay this way. It doesn't mean that it's the way it should be.

Too often, the way we see the world is the way we assume it just is – and it never dawns on us that there might be an alternative. It's a little like silver that's oxidized to black. This week I wandered into the church kitchen as the women of the Chancel Guild were polishing the silver service for communion – I invited them to come do my silver any time! And it dawned on me, if you didn't *know* better, if you'd never *seen* silver, you'd assume that *black* is the way silver is supposed to be. That would save a lot of trouble for us all. Now, forgive me for being sexist here, but for guys who may have never polished silver in their lives, let me use a different analogy. Think about a sweet, high-end car that gets spattered with mud and salt stains. If you didn't know better, if you'd never seen a car that's new or polished, you'd assume that dirty and splattered is just the way it's supposed to be. But what if it's not? What if dirty and smudgy is not the way it was intended to be? What if the silver, or the car, could *shine*?

This is what John the Baptist is saying: our lives aren't the way they were intended to be. Our lives are intended to shine. And though we may not see the tarnish or the spatters anymore - we are so used to them - we are invited to look at them differently. We are encouraged to repent, to turn to see the way our lives *could* be. To turn and see our lives the way God intended them to be.

Sometimes it starts with the smallest steps. I suspect they did not know it at the time, but that's what the Stewardship committee asked of us in our

"commitment of heart." Beyond our financial gifts – our "commitment of treasure" – they invited us to examine our priorities, to turn to see whether there might be more to our faith than we've rendered thus far. I've been inspired by what you've committed to doing, and I've noticed a pattern: many of you have taken the small, simple step of examining your time, which like our closets are cluttered with thousands of things, things that are really not all that valuable or urgent. You have started to turn and look at time differently: to put worship first, to join a Bible study or teach Sunday school, to focus on prayer in your home – all things that help you find your compass again each week. You have pledged to make time for the poor who are struggling right here in Lake County, who are often invisible to us: to bring food for the homeless shelter or Soup Kitchen or the food pantry. You have promised to put your resources into God's purposes: to recycle, or to learn the meaning of justice, to sort rummage or work for justice through government. You have promised to be more open with your faith: to talk more openly about it with friends or your children, or welcome a stranger to church. This is the stuff of repentance, in its truest sense. These are the first steps of turning.

Repentance – turning – seeing our lives differently: it doesn't just happen once and for all. It happens again and again in our lives, season after season. Sometimes it is deliberate, like the pledges we have made, and sometimes it sneaks up on us, as Scripture puts it, "like a thief in the night." It's a privilege I have, to see this turning all the time, and to witness its power. There is a woman in our church who told me she's been worrying about the cards to get out, the house to be cleaned, the gifts to buy, wrap and mail, and suddenly she gets a phone call: her son's been in an accident, she hears, "no, Mom, I'm really fine, the car's just dented." And in a split-second she realized all the stuff she wastes her time fussing over doesn't matter. This season, she vows, there will be time for everything that matters, time for her family, time to reach out to others. She is starting to turn.

And I see so many families in our church for whom the year has been tight, so tight that lay-offs are happening, and bonuses aren't going out, and travel plans have been shelved, and the vacation house is going on the market,

if there is a market for it at all. Sometimes it's the husband and sometimes it's the wife who is feeling blue, and often annoyed, and occasionally even ashamed for letting their kids down as they adjust to their "new normal." But then they hear about a friend whose home is in foreclosure, or whose heat is turned off, or whose kids are showering at a neighbor's home till the water gets turned on again. And for the first time they recognize that to some extent it's a game of chance that they still have basic services, enough to eat, and clothes to wear. And they decide it's time to stop thinking they're in this alone and start sharing big-time, because we're all in this together. They are starting to turn.

And I witness a person in our church who spends her days overwhelmed by the endless emails to return, clients to visit, her own family needs and a house that could use some tending. It feels very tiring, and often, in spite of all the people around her, it feels very lonely. Nothing has made it better: not hurling herself at work; not filling her down-time with "productive" reading and chores, not stuffing herself with mindless eating, not even volunteering. So she dares herself to stop for a few minutes now and then every day to do a "gut check" – to pay attention to the feelings beneath the determination, to dare to let the reality of the emptiness sit there for awhile. It's not pretty, but oddly it feels, well, real. And she feels more alive than she has in some time. She is starting to turn.

Our lives – they are bound to become tarnished, to become muddied, and smudged in ways we no longer even notice. But they do not have to be that way. God invites us, each one of us, to turn, to look, to take the first step. It doesn't have to be cosmic, and it doesn't have to be grand. It's just a step, a single step of turning, turning towards our God who has drawn close to us already, who wants something better for us and our world than we've been willing to settle for.

I don't know what that means for you. Maybe *you* don't know what it means for you yet. But we do know this: when we can't see life any other way than it is, God brings people to open our eyes. John the Baptist in his hairshirt

at the Jordan River … a call on the phone from a son … a neighbor in need … a still small voice within.

Repentance. It's not about feeling guilt or remorse. It's about turning and seeing the world differently. My guess is we're much closer than we think. A wonderful woman I know put it this way recently: "This, to me, is one of the greatest gifts of Christian life: that God never tires of offering us the opportunity to begin again. [This is] God's hope in us, God's confidence that we can change."[ii] God never tires of offering us the chance to repent, to turn and remember how things are supposed to be, not tarnished and smudged but bright and clear and new. God never tires of showing us the world as it really might be. God never tires of showing us how *we* might really be. God never tires of giving us the chance to shine. Amen.

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[i]For the dual function of guilt as negative and positive motivator see Amodio, David M.; Devine, Patricia G.; Harmon-Jones, Eddie, "A Dynamic Model of Guilt: Implications for Motivation and Self-Regulation in the Context of Prejudice," Psychological Science, Volume 18, Number 6, June 2007 , pp. 524-530(7), Blackwell Publishing

[ii]Stephanie Paulsell, "Kept Awake by Love," http://www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=8012