

"Fixing Broken Windows"

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

12/5/04 Matthew 3:1-12

[FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH](#)

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BROKEN WINDOWS

Kathleen Parker, a columnist in the Orlando Sentinel, wrote an article this week in which she referred to a famous Harvard study. It is often called the "broken windows" theory of social breakdown, and it goes something like this:

If a broken window in a home is not repaired, pretty soon all the windows in that home will be broken, and if this trend continues, the neighborhood itself will go to pot (literally!).

The Harvard professors theorized that the reason broken windows can lead to a whole neighborhood going downhill is that people see this as a sign that no one cares and that no one is in charge. The broken window becomes an invitation to further vandalism and even worse crimes.

Parker suggested in her article that this broken window theory could also be applied to the rise of negative behavior in our society. As broken windows perpetuate more vandalism, so the loosening of moral standards has prompted a general disintegration of civility.

Her examples of this theory were the recent fights that broke out at the football game between Clemson and South Carolina, and the terrible melee that occurred at the Indiana Pacers-Detroit Pistons game.

(For those of you who don't follow sports, these fights were truly frightening and went well beyond the usual shoving matches that are sometimes common at sporting events. Many sports writers and commentators have been asking how and why these things happened.)

Her answer was broken windows. Trash talk and posturing eventually leads to violence. The way to get a handle on what is happening in sports is to repair the broken windows of disrespect and poor sportsmanship.

In the same way, the general coarsening of society has led to a situation in which people are willing to break even more rules. She said that certain rules of decorum, i.e., manners are necessary in order for a society to remain civilized. She concluded her article with these words,

"Either we believe in and honor community standards or we don't. Ignoring simple standards, constructed to protect and advance civilization is like ignoring the broken window. In time the culture—like the neighborhood—goes you know where."

JOHN THE BAPTIST

Kathleen, you receive my 2004 John the Baptist award! You go girl.

Of course I'm sure she's a much better dresser than John. John the Baptist, according to our lesson for today, preached his message in a course camel hair coat held on by a leather belt. In addition to being a bad dresser, John was no gourmet. He had a steady diet of locusts and honey.

All of this was symbolic. The people had heard and seen stuff like this before from the prophets of old. In fact John looked a whole lot like the prophet Elijah who was supposed to return from heaven and herald the coming of the Messiah.

Even the location of his preaching, the desert, hearkened back to the days of old when God led Israel from slavery to freedom. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, John referred to himself as the "voice of one crying out in the wilderness," one who would "prepare the way of the Lord."

So, what did John cry out in the wilderness? He cried out a message of warning. He urged the people to prepare for the coming kingdom of heaven by repenting of their sin. He cried, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." The word translated "repent" means to change your mind and your behavior. It means to go in a totally different direction.

REPENTANCE AND HEAVEN

If you ask the average person what they think about when they think of heaven, they'll say things like, "I think of soft music and angels and seeing people I love."

We can understand wanting to think like that. All of us want heaven to be something we want, and of course we want to be there.

But, when the Bible talks about the kingdom of heaven, quite often the specifics are quite different from what we might think about or even desire.

The kingdom of heaven brings about a big change in the world here and now. The kingdom of heaven is not about some comfortable resting place in the sweet by and by. No, it is a heavenly challenge to what is going on in our world. As Matthew presents it, the kingdom of heaven is something that comes to disturb our comfortable and sinful way of life.

When I think of John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus, I often think of him as a crossing guard, thrusting his stop sign into the air and directing the people to go a different way. Though many people come to him for answers, John the Baptist is definitely a throw back to earlier times who comes with an answer that not many expect.

A prophet like John the Baptist offends some people. His message is as harsh and as crude as his dress. What can a rube, an ancient relic like John the Baptist tell us about how we should live? After all, we're modern, sophisticated people. We know about God's grace and goodness in Jesus Christ. We don't need any talk about being baptized to wash away our sins.

Let the church down the street talk bring the message about fire and brimstone. We're the moderate Presbyterians where everything is done "decently and in order." What is a decent and orderly way to tell someone that they're on the road that leads to hell? How can we call the respected religious leaders of our community "a brood of vipers" and not offend?

But, we have to come to terms with the fact that this is the message. And don't think that it's just John that talks this way. John described the coming Messiah in these terms, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."
Matthew 3:12 (NRSV)

Was John right? Did Jesus come to judge? Did Jesus come to divide the world in such a harsh way? The answer is yes. In fact, in Mark's gospel the message of Jesus and the message of John are quite similar.

John says, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand." And Jesus preaches in Galilee at the beginning of his ministry, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." Mark 1:15 (NRSV)

GOOD NEWS OR BAD?

There is only one difference between the message of John and Jesus. The message of John is presented as a fire that seems to burn everything up forever. The message of Jesus is presented as "good news" that makes a new world possible. So which is it? Maybe both could be true in a way.

Barbara Brown Taylor points out that throughout the Bible, fire is a sign of God's presence. For example, God speaks to Moses out of the burning bush. It is a pillar of fire which leads the people of Israel through the wilderness.

Now the fire of God's presence is still fire, and fire can burn and kill. But, it is not just any old fire. It is the fire of God's presence, and we know that at the heart of any appearance of God is a story about the God who comes to seek and save the lost.

Taylor wrote, "It is the fire of a potter who wants to make useful vessels out of damp clay. It is the fire of a jeweler who wants to refine pure gold from rough ore. It does not have to be the fire of destruction"

It may also be the fire of transformation, a fire that both lights us up and changes us, melting us down and reforming us more nearly to the image of God. It is the fire which Jesus himself baptizes us, inviting us into bright, hot relationship with him.

Even when the fire seems bent on consuming us, like Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace we find that we have company, and that even in the hottest regions of our own personal hells we do not sweat alone."

I guess that whether the fire of God's presence brings us to heaven or hell depends upon our perspective. If we think that things are just fine, then we will quite naturally make fun of someone who wants to talk about sin, repentance, and the fire of God's presence.

I kind of get the feeling that this sort of thing was going on in our lesson for today. The religious leaders of Jesus' day seemed to be saying,

"How quaint that John wants to preach about sin in the desert. He's got the whole retro look to go with his message too. Let's go out and observe from afar. It'll be good for a few laughs."

But, they couldn't observe John from afar. He confronted them up close and personal and said, "You brood of vipers. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" A modern day equivalent might be to have John say, "You're just like rats deserting a sinking ship."

Now notice that John doesn't say that they are doing the wrong thing in coming to him. They need to be there just like the other people. But, they need to be there as participants instead of just coming as observers. The religious leaders need the baptism of repentance as much as anyone. They too need to change their actions, repent and go in a different direction. They too need to bear good fruit in keeping with their repentance.

In God's kingdom, we all come on equal footing. Our education, our heritage and our social standing do not earn us a free pass. All of us must experience baptism in the cold, muddy waters of the Jordan. All of us must repent of our sins to prepare for the coming of Jesus.

That's where the message becomes good news or bad news depending upon how you look at it. The call to repentance can be good news because it means that change is possible. We don't have to stay where we are. The power of God's Spirit can make repentance

possible.

But, in order to receive repentance, we have to want it. And if we don't want it, the call to repentance can be terrible news.

Let's face it. For many of us repentance is terrible news. Many of us just don't want to mess up our neatly styled hair and nicely pressed clothes with a sudden dip in the Jordan River. That's for those other folks who need it more than us. Or is it?

THE WOUND THAT GOD LETS IN

Rabbi Harold Kushner talks about how the "heroes" of the Bible are not perfect people. Their deeds of faith may overshadow their mistakes, but they are certainly not mythical models of perfection.

For example, Moses repeatedly loses his temper at the people he is supposed to be leading. But, Moses sees God more clearly than any other prophet. David commits adultery with a married woman and arranges to have her husband killed. And yet, God loves David like no other leader in the Bible.

Throughout the Bible, the story is always the same. The "heroes" of the Bible have some serious character flaws and so do we. But, according to the Rabbi, admitting to our flawed character is a necessary first step in spiritual growth.

He wrote, "The person who knows his flaws all too well is open to God's love and God's presence, because he realizes he is not God. In the words of authors Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, 'Imperfection is the wound that lets God in.'"

It's easy to talk about the sins of those overpaid NBA players or how rude the Clemson fans can be when you play in "Death Valley." There is no question that they need to change. The broken windows in their life need to be repaired or things are going to get worse and worse.

But, the broken windows in our life need to be repaired as well. It might not be that big a crack today, but tomorrow it will be bigger and the next day it will be bigger still. You have to prepare and you have to prepare now because God's kingdom is closer than you think.

SMALL CRACKS AND BIG PROBLEMS

During hurricane Charley, a small crack that had developed in one of my bedroom windows grew much larger. But, given all the other tasks that I had to do, it didn't seem that important. Then Frances came and the gap widened even more. Since the window was too big for me to handle, I frantically tried to get someone to repair it. And finally, just before Jeanne blew into town, much to my great relief, the job was done.

How much easier it would have been to have repaired the damage earlier before the storms came. But, I chose to wait. I chose to put off today what I could do tomorrow. And it almost cost me big time.

John's message of repentance is similar. That small crack in our life might seem unimportant, but we need to take care of it today. That crack can become a gaping hole by the time Jesus comes.

One preacher said that this "season more than any other points out the gap between our inner lives and our external behavior, smiling and cheery at the work party while inside we're drowning in loneliness and pain. The images of the happy family and the perfect Christmas become standards that announce judgment over our failed relationships and our inability to make things right."

John points out what we all know is true. There is a gap between what we say and what we actually do. John is the voice of the law. He shows us our sin and calls us to repentance.

In this season when everyone is "preparing" by eating too much, drinking too much and spending too much, Christians are called to prepare in a more sober way. We prepare for Christmas by repentance. We prepare for Christmas by letting God shine some light on the dark places of our life.

And this requires a willingness to be honest about where we have failed. This requires setting time aside for reflection when everyone else doesn't even have time to sit down with the family for supper.

DEEP DOWN JOY

I guess some would say that I'm even more confused than usual (which is saying a lot!). Why do I talk so much about repentance and confession when everyone else is talking about joy and celebration?

I talk about repentance because I know that by the grace of God in Jesus Christ repentance is good news. Repentance means that this year doesn't have to be just more of the same. This year can truly be different.

Through the power of God's Spirit, we can be different.

The Jesus who was born long ago in Bethlehem and the Jesus who will come again in glory some time in the future can come into our hearts in a new way this Christmas season.

But, we must be prepared to receive him.

More than any other time of year, Christmas is a time when the secular world takes the greatest news the world has ever heard and turns it into bad news. As Christians we believe that God was in Christ, that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

The world believes this is a time to party hardy.

They have it partially right. It is time to celebrate. But, the celebration does not come from Mickey's very merry Christmas parade; a tree filled with presents or even "doctored" eggnog.

The celebration comes from a place deep inside us, a place so dark that before this time we were afraid to even admit that it existed.

But, John the Baptist tells us that this is the only way to be prepared. Take down the plywood shutters in you life and fix that broken window.

Let light shine in the darkness and prepare the way of the Lord. Amen.