

Some Calls to Repentance Should be Heeded

You've doubtless seen cartoons in which a be-robed and bearded figure is holding a sign that says, "Repent, the end is near!" The cartoons exist because it is relatively easy to make fun of those who issue dire warnings while still engaging in behaviors that suggest they have plans beyond the doomsday horizon. End-of-the-world predictions have yet to come to pass.

Unfortunately, such caricatures tend to rob the message of repentance of its truth and authentic meaning.

Calls for repentance are often viewed with suspicion and cynicism. They are huckster preachers' stock in trade, a means to manipulate emotionally insecure and fearful listeners to sign on to their particular brand of religion and – most importantly – send money. Or calls to repentance come across as cheap grace: confess your sins, say you're sorry, and God will forgive you and make sure you have a place in heaven.

But the idea of repentance, pervasive in both Judaism and Christianity (and I suspect in other religions as well), is rooted in the reality that there are times when we need to change in order to be healthy, perhaps even in order to survive.

Religiously speaking, repentance has to do with being in right relation to God. Existentially speaking, it may involve sorrow, grief, or regret that moves one to want to change. Practically speaking, it requires a change in attitude. But more than that, it also leads to a change in one's ways.

One of the primary Greek words for repentance in the New Testament is *metanoia*. A primary meaning of repentance is to turn – as in to turn away from evil and to turn toward the good. Repentance involves a fundamental reorientation of one's life, a new direction, a real movement away from one's past and toward a new and different and better future.

The tactic of calling people to repentance may be off-putting, but for those who are captive to an unhealthy lifestyle, or those caught up in some harmful personal relationship, repentance may be precisely what they need.. It may also be off-putting for me to say this, but our society today is in desperate need of repentance.

Militarism, racism, sexism, xenophobic nationalism, and exceptionalism are just a few of the "isms" whose ugliness, danger, and harmfulness have become overtly manifest in recent years. It is also becoming increasingly apparent that we need to repent of our exploitation of the earth and its resources. Deep institutional and political resistance to this recognition pervades our society. One major political party is loathe to admit that global climate change exists, while the other seems unable to fathom just how great and urgent is the threat we face.

There are so many fronts on which we need a turning, a radical reorientation in our thinking and in our actions. Old dangers remain even as new ones arise. But they are interrelated, and feed off one another. Martin Luther King, Jr. observed over 50 years ago, for example, that we are

beset by “the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism.” He understood that piecemeal efforts to address any one of these “isms” would not suffice. Today’s white nationalism and earth-exploitative capitalism are part and parcel of this complex of symbiotic malignancies that are eating us up.

It would be no exaggeration, nor would it be in any way comedic, for those who care about the human race to go about holding signs with an essential twist on an old theme – signs that say, “Repent! If we don’t, the end is a foregone conclusion.”

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