

“U-Turns Encouraged”
June 21, 2009
Rev. Ray Miller

This week I was entertaining nine friends of mine from Arkansas, Illinois, and one from Littleton, Colorado. We've been friends since around 1971. We used to get together every month, and celebrate whoever had a birthday that month, but now we get together mostly every year, and celebrate our latest aches and pains, but that some of us are still alive. One of the things we did this week was, we went to visit a lot of places. I decided not to use my GPS, big mistake. I often ended up in the wrong place, and hence, had to do a U-turn. Once on Mason Street because I headed south when I should have headed north, a big one when I went to the Candlelight Dinner Theater only to discover we had tickets for the Carousel Dinner Theater, and a variety of other things.

You see these signs all over the place that say "No U-Turns." What's that all about? "No U-Turns." Not only do we see it on city streets, but we discover that there must be signs in politics, there must be signs in our personal lives, all over the place, that say "No U-Turns." Never admit that you've made a mistake. Never admit that you're on a road that's leading not to the place where you want or need to be. Just keep on keeping on. Even if it means that you're going somewhere that will lead to frustration. Even if it means that you are going somewhere that will create even greater problems. Just keep on keeping on.

There's a verse of Scripture that I want to share with you. It's from the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 1, verse 14. At the beginning of his ministry, according to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus began by saying, "The time is at hand. Repent and believe the Gospel." Believe the good news. Repent. Now, there's a word you don't hear very often these days. I don't know what that word triggers in your memory. I would guess that for some of you, when you hear the word "repent," it brings to mind some preacher long ago, hopefully, or maybe in a tent with a sawdust trail, who would say, "Repent, brothers and sisters," and they want you to fall on your knees crying, admitting what a terrible person you are, what terrible things you have done. Well, you know what? I don't think that's what it means to repent.

When I was in basic training, I had a drill sergeant whose name, fortunately, I forget. Any of you who have been in basic training know that your drill sergeant wasn't one of your friends. But he would give us commands, that we were supposed to follow. He would say, "About face," and you'd turn around. "Right face," "Left face," and you were to make those turns crisply. I can't do that any more. I tried it at home. It didn't work. If I had done what I did at home when I was in basic training, I would have had to do fifty pushups for messing up.

Now, which of these commands correlates to the word "repent"? Right face and left face would take us in a different direction, but the word "repent" suggests a radical change of direction, like turning around. Taking a look where you're going. I love to go up to the mountains. Sometimes it's in the winter time, when I go up to ski, in the fall, when I go up to see the aspen trees or to listen to the elk bugleing, or just taking a ride up there to

enjoy the beautiful, beautiful landscape that we in Colorado are so blessed to have. Often when I'm driving up there, I'll be listening to the radio, AM/FM whatever, and the further I get into the mountains, well, pretty soon the station begins to fade in and out. Then the static comes, then it's gone. Now, if I am listening to something I really want to hear, the only way I can hear it is to turn around and go back to where I can pick up that signal again. Well, the same is true in life, in faith, in our relationship with God. Sometimes we are driving so far away that we lose touch with what life is really all about, with where God really wants us to go with our lives. And when that happens, like Jesus says, - repent. About face.

What are we to repent of? I thought about putting this on the "Build a Sermon" place that Chuck likes to use. I'm technologically challenged, so I didn't know how to do that, and he was gone, so... I was going to ask people to tell me what they think we need to repent of, but I decided, since I didn't put it there, I'd just do it myself. What do we need to repent of? I think we need to repent of the "isms" that characterize and shape so much of life today. You know what I mean. Things like sexism, racism, materialism, nationalism, the list could go on and on and on. I believe we need to do an about face on the "isms" so that we can take a look again where we are in terms of these "isms." Sexism. You see, equality is not just about seeing to it that women get paid the same amount of money as men for the same job being done. It's not just about Title 9 sports in colleges and universities.

To repent of sexism means that we need to be willing to turn around and take a look at ourselves and see where it is, in our lives, that we disrespect women. Sometimes that comes in the form of thinking that we know what a woman should be. There are women who feel called to be a mother and a housekeeper, and they are wonderful at it. And that is a wonderful thing for these women to do. But there are other women who have other gifts. My late wife was one of those. For 38 years, June was a teacher and then a school counselor in the Chicago public school system, always in inner city schools. She had a gift, a compassion, an ability to relate to kids that I am sure made a wonderful impact on just hundreds of kids that she came into contact with. I thank God that she utilized the gift that God gave her. And she was a good mother, her two children would certainly attest to that. How important for each of us to look inside ourselves, to see ways in which we may denigrate women, and then do an about face. Repent.

Racism. The way in which we look at people of other races and ethnic origins, other religions, other lifestyles.... I grew up in a blue-collar town in Western Pennsylvania, it was a factory town. The predominant population was Italian and Catholic. We were German and Protestant. We lived on the hill, they lived down the hill. I grew up in a family where it was customary to use epithets that denigrated Italians, Blacks, who live out on the edge of town in shantytowns. Those were part of my growing-up years. And then one day I showed up at home with my fiancée. I brought her from Chicago. Her name was Junetta Rabito. Italian! Oy vey! But you know, as my parents got to know June, all of those prejudicial attitudes began to melt away. She loved them and they grew to love her. Today it isn't Italians, it isn't Catholics, I think, I hope not, but today, our attitudes that we need to take a look at are the attitudes we have toward Arabs, Hispanics,

Jews, gays, Muslims, people who are different than us. We need to turn around and take a look at, how do we relate to such people? How do we think of such people? How do we talk about such people? I think Jesus says, "About face. Repent."

And materialism. I know a lot of us would say, "I am who I am, I've got what I've got because I have worked hard." And that's true. I'm sure that's true. But it's also because of the family into which you were born, the circumstances with which you were blessed, the opportunities that were available to you. We are among, every one of us here, is among the wealthiest people on the face of this planet. And so Jesus' words are, "You know, I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was a prisoner, and you visited me. I was a stranger, and you welcomed me. When you do it to one of these, you're doing it to me." How do we use the abundance with which our lives have been blessed? Maybe some of us need to do an about face. Repent. Turn around. It's important to take a look at ourselves and where we are in relation to the materialistic world in which we live.

Nationalism. I know there are people, maybe some here this morning, who would say, "My country, right or wrong, my country." I don't know whether anybody is going to respond to the message this morning, but I know I had a response one time to a sermon that I preached. One couple left the church. That was the response. I preached the sermon around the 4th of July, and I talked about the United States of America and suggested that maybe we weren't perfect. That was more than that couple could take, and they left. Well, you know, I think that I am as patriotic as any other person in our country, but I also believe that patriotism means a willingness to take a look at who we are and see those places of imperfection where we can become better than we are. General Norman Schwarzkopf said, "Your organization, nation, or personal life will never get better unless you are willing to admit that there is something wrong with it." There is a lot that is right with our country, but there are also some things that are wrong with it, and the only way we can see those and make a difference by trying, putting our energy into changing it, is by repenting of what some of us tend to do, and that is not to see the flaws.

Jesus says, "About face, repent." I think the area in which we need to do that most is the way in which we see ourselves. How do you see yourself? In Psalm 139 we read these words. "You God have knit me together in your womb. I am awesomely and wonderfully made." Wow. Are you willing to say that about yourself? "I am awesomely and wonderfully made." Or in Psalm 8. The Psalmist says, "When I look at the heavens, the moon and stars which you have made, who are we, that you would be mindful of us? That you would care about us? And yet, God, you have made us a little less than heavenly beings." What about there in the first story of creation in Genesis? God creates everything on the first five days, and then God creates humankind, and when God looks at all that God has created, what is it God says? "It is very good."

Can you believe that about yourself? Jesus said, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." Now, some of us will say, "I know that God loves us, meaning all of you, but not me. I know myself, I know my flaws, I know all the places where I've messed up." But the word is, God loved the world. The world means all of us. All of us, all of us, not

just women, not just men, not just Americans, not just Christians, not just white people, etc. etc. etc. God loves the world so much that God sent a son to all of us, all of us.

We say repent. Now me, I look at my life and I say, "Ray, you're a mess. You have made a mess of things. You mess up all the time. You mess up with some of the things you say, some of the things you think, some of the things you do. I've messed up so many times already today, it's amazing that I'm still here. I don't want to project this onto you, but maybe sometimes you look at yourself and say, "I've messed up. I'm a mess." I don't know if any of you have read the book *The Shack*. It's a novel, I think it's on the best-seller list. The Open Hearts class is discussing it even as we speak. There will be a four-week class later this summer that Martha Conant and I will lead, on *The Shack*. It's a novel, and it's about a guy by the name of MacKenzie, Mack. And in the book he, I won't go into the whole thing, but he ends up meeting God, who in this book is called Papa, who is a black woman; Jesus, who is Jesus, and Sarayu, who is the Holy Spirit. Now one day, Mack is invited by Sarayu to go into the garden and to do some gardening. He goes out into the garden, and in the garden it's a mess. It's a mess. There are beautiful flowers, but there are also a huge amount of weeds all mixed up together. He said, "I wouldn't have done it that way, if I had done it. I would have landscaped better than this." After they get finished with their gardening for that day, Sarayu turned to MacKenzie and said, "MacKenzie, you are such a delight. Thank you for all your hard work." "I didn't do that much, really," he says apologetically. "I mean, look at this mess." His gaze move over the garden that surrounded them "But it really is beautiful and full of you, Sarayu. Even though it seems like there's lots of work that still needs to be done, I feel strangely at home and welcome here." The two looked at each other and grinned. Sarayu stepped toward him until she had invaded his personal space. "And well you should, MacKenzie. Because this garden is your soul. This mess is you. Together, you and I have been working with a purpose in your heart, and it is wild and beautiful and perfectly in process. To you it seems like a mess, but I see a perfect pattern emerging and growing and alive." The impact of her words almost crumbled all of Mack's reserve. He looked again at their garden, his garden, and it really was a mess. But incredible and wonderful at the same time, Papa was here and Sarayu loved the mess. Sarayu loved the mess. It was almost too much to comprehend."

So, there you have it. Repent of what? Repent of looking at ourselves and seeing only a mess - but seeing how we are in process, and seeing how even though we may be a mess, God's love is poured out extravagantly for each of us, so that God says, "You are awesomely and wonderfully made. I have made you just a little lower than heavenly beings. I call you my child. I love you." And when we are willing to repent of that negative way of looking at ourselves, all of a sudden we don't need any of the "isms" any more, because you see the "isms" are the ways in which we try to find somebody that we think isn't quite as good as us, so that we can elevate ourselves in our own eyes. So the word is, "Repent." The word is "About face."