

Turn Around

Acts 2:37-47

“Turn Around!” It comes from the Greek word “metanoia” which is often translated as “repent.” It means “to change one’s mind, to think differently, to reconsider.” (Strong’s)

Turn around makes me think of a GPS navigation system. Basically, you tell these little computers the address you want to go to, and the computer will tell you how to get there as you’re driving. There’s a small, interactive map that comes up on the screen, and a nice calm voice that tells you which way to turn. If you start going in the wrong direction or make a wrong turn, it informs you of your blunder and you’ll hear the voice say, “Turn around, you’re headed in the wrong direction.” And if you don’t listen you’ll soon be redirected to another route in order to get you back on track.

“Turn around. You are headed in the wrong direction.”

So, here you are, going along through life, doing whatever you want, whatever you think makes you feel good or happy – doesn’t really matter to you what God thinks or how it affects other people because if you are honest, the only thing you care about is yourself.

Martin Luther defined our predicament as humans as *homo incurvatus in se*, that is, “humans curved in on” ourselves. God made us to be in relationship with God and with each other, to live in community with each other, praising and worshipping God. But look at Adam and Eve, instead of following God’s instructions, they decided they knew better, they wanted the forbidden fruit no matter what and they chose to disobey God. *Incurvatus in se*, humans curved in on ourselves is the root of sin. (sIn)

We may not be ax murderers or adulterers, but how about things like lying, deception, lust, being disrespectful of parents or others in authority, bitterness, gossiping, revenge, self-indulgence? And that list doesn’t even include all the things that we know we should do and don’t – that’s sin, too. No matter how good we might think we are, there is sin in our lives.

When those folks on the Day of Pentecost heard Peter's message about Jesus - how Jesus died on the cross for our sins, paying the penalty for all we've done wrong even before we asked for it, they realized just how far of the mark they were and wanted to know what they should do. To which Peter responds "Metanoia," "Turn Around," repent, change your way of thinking, put your trust, your faith in Jesus and all that he has done for you and wants to do with you. Let him show you a better way.

ILLUS: There was a painter by the name of Jock, who was very interested in making a penny where he could, so he often would thin his paint to make it go further. As it happened, he got away with this for some time. A Church decided to do a big restoration job that involved painting its building. Jock put in a bid, and because his price was so low, he got the job. He went about setting up the scaffolding, buying the paint and, yes, thinning it down with the turpentine. Jock was up on the scaffolding, painting away with the job nearly completed, when suddenly there was a horrendous clap of thunder, and the sky opened. The torrential rain washed the thinned paint off the church and knocked Jock off the scaffolding and on to the lawn, surrounded by telltale puddles of the thinned and useless paint. Jock was no fool. He knew this was a judgment from the Almighty, so he got on his knees and cried: "Oh, God! Forgive me! What should I do?" And from the thunder, a mighty voice spoke... Repaint! Repaint! And thin no more!

Metanoia is so much more than feeling bad about what you've done or even saying you're sorry when you've done something wrong. Metanoia, repentance, means a total change of direction. Repentance means to orient your life in a different direction and to walk in that direction. Repentance means to listen to that voice we hear telling us to turn around.

On the Day of Pentecost, 3,000 people did "metanoia", repent, turn back to God and were baptized. (Can you just imagine? 3,000 people!) They changed the direction of their lives from selfishness and rebellion against God's laws turning towards Christ, depending on Christ for forgiveness, mercy, guidance and purpose.

These new believers united with other believers. They committed themselves to learning more about God. They joined in fellowship with one another eating together regularly like they were family (one of the most important ways to build relationships). They prayed both individually and corporately. They lived generously pooling their resources so that each person's needs were met. They worshipped God daily and were amazed by all the miracles and wonders they saw (God sightings). And they did all this with ἀγαλλίαω (ä-gäl-lē'-ä-sēs) exultation, extreme joy, gladness and ἀφελότης (af-el-ot'-ace) literally without stubbing their toe (in other words, they stayed focused).ⁱ

And everyone who saw their new way of living liked what they saw and turned their own lives around embracing the way of Jesus instead. It's as if they were lighthouses – shining with the love of Jesus and drawing others in to a relationship with Jesus. This is the model for what it means to be a church.

But as Pastor Bob Ierien, wrote in a blog postⁱⁱ,

“Not only are we as humans *homo incurvatus in se*, but often the congregations made up of humans are examples of *ecclesia incurvatus in se*, the church curved in on itself.

This “incurvature” is evident in both the embedded theology and, by extension, the practical life and ministry of many congregations. Our incurvature makes us obsessed with our own sin and salvation and deafens us to all that Christ had to say about living the gospel in this life....we don't give a thought to the salvation of those around us. Our incurved theology is all about what we hope God will do for us ...there is little thought and less energy expended on what God is calling us to do on behalf of the other.

Our incurved theology leads inevitably to incurved ministry....oblivious to the spiritual needs of those outside the church. Pastoral ministry is focused on meeting the needs of the congregation, not on carrying the gospel out into the community. Lay ministry is focused on keeping things inside the congregation running smoothly, not on

leading it out into the world in mission. We're more concerned with who made a mess in the church kitchen than with the thousands right outside our doors who have not heard the gospel. We boldly proclaim that we want our congregations to grow, but rarely are we willing to make the changes that will require; even more rarely do we think about embodying the gospel for others purely for the other's sake.

To be sure, there are exceptions to what I am describing. The vast majority of ELCA congregations, however, are indeed curved in on themselves, more concerned with their own well-being, size and budgets than with the huge numbers of people right outside our doors who have never heard that Jesus loves them enough to die for them."

The irony is that the more inward focused a person or a congregation becomes, the less likely it is that things will stay healthy inside that person or that congregation. Like black holes, the ultimate cosmic example of *incurvatus in se*, people and congregations can become sucking vortexes of anxiety and neediness. Like black holes, such people and congregations absorb light rather than emitting it; like black holes, they can become enormously destructive to those around them (and ultimately to themselves).

So what are we to do? How do we keep ourselves and our congregations from being *incurvatus in se*?

Individually, if you've never followed Peter's command to repent and give your life to Jesus Christ, then I encourage you need to do that right now. Confess your sin to God - that just means agree with God that sin is a fact - and ask God to forgive you based on the finished work of Jesus on the cross and His resurrection. Acknowledge Jesus as your master and give control of your life to Him. This is the essence of metanoia, repentance, turning back to God. Like the GPS, you realize you're going in the wrong direction and you turn around. You're going one way in your life and realize you're going the wrong way and you make a U-turn and change direction.

When you are living your life with Jesus as your guide, others will notice and it will give us opportunities to tell them about Jesus.

But what about us as a church? What do we need to do to get back on track with being a church like the one modeled in Acts 2? What needs to change, to be turned around so that we can be a lighthouse – shining with the love of Jesus and drawing others in to a relationship with him?

Did you know that according to the 2010 Census, 35% of the population of Spencer claimed no religious affiliation – that is more than 670 people in our community who need to hear about Jesus. And if Spencer is anything like the rest of the country, that number is rapidly growing ever year and probably somewhere closer to 50% of the population.

I don't have the answers, but I do know that it's time for us as a church to "turn around," to look outside our doors to see our neighbors in our community, to be willing to make the changes that are needed in order to embody the gospel for others, to worry less about our budgets and our own comfort and instead think about how to reach the numbers of people right outside our doors who have never heard that Jesus loves them enough to die for them. It's time for us to "turn around."

ⁱ https://www.blueletterbible.org/kjv/act/2/42/t_conc_1020046

ⁱⁱ *Blog Posted by Bob Ierien*

<http://freetheology.blogspot.com/2008/11/incurvatus-in-se.html>