

Promise for All
Acts 2:14a, 36-41
April 23, 2023
First Presbyterian, Luling

One of the joys of this temporary General Presbyter job is working with a staff. Each one of them are talented, gifted people, hard workers, always willing to help a person who sometimes has absolutely no idea what she's doing. I get to have phone calls or zooms once a week with each of them, one-on-one, and that has been enjoyable. I'm getting to know each of them and know a bit about their piece of our ministry together.

I already knew the director of John Knox Ranch, our camp. I actually have known Henry since he was in high school, and I now admire his ministry at camp immensely. A couple of weeks ago in our check-in call, he was telling me about being a guest speaker at an outdoor recreation class at Texas State. His assignment was to talk about camping and spirituality. He said one of the questions that he got from students was "how does spirituality affect what you do at camp?"

The answer to that question is: in every way you can think of. They serve meals family style, because they believe that community is important. They write policies and build buildings in a way to keep every single camper safe, physically and emotionally, because when you believe each person is God's beloved child, it's important to live that out. They're setting aside hundreds of acres that will never have buildings on it, because it is God's creation, and they're working to take care of it, to keep the water clean, and the land stewarded. Every camper is welcomed and accepted, no matter how irritating they are by mid-week, when it's hot and dry and nobody's slept well.

I'll admit that I don't have any experience with a camp that isn't a church camp, but it seems to me that believing in a creating and creative God, and in the incarnation of Jesus, and in the presence of the Spirit—really believing—means that it affects the whole thing, the way it's set up and the way it's carried out, and the philosophy undergirding the entire operation. I'm not saying that non-church camps don't care about kids, not at all. But it's a different orientation, a different way of looking at things, that affects the whole scope of camp.

Repentance, the way Peter is talking about it here in Acts, is similar in its scope. We, or maybe I'll speak for myself and say I, I have tended to think that repentance is one step in a forgiveness of sins process. First comes confession of sin, the recognition that I've done something wrong. Then is repentance--deciding to behave differently on that particular thing. And forgiveness, rooted in God's grace rather than my effectiveness at confession or repentance.

What Peter is talking about as repentance is bigger, wider, and more difficult. It's described later on in Acts like this: "Turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance." (Acts 26:20). The Greek word is a combination of words that mean "think with" or "think after." It means to think about something, to re-think, to reconsider in a way that leads to a complete shift in orientation or way of perceiving¹ Peter is calling them to reconsider what they believe about Jesus. He's just spent thirty minutes preaching and teaching them about how Jesus is both Messiah and Lord, and then concludes with "this Jesus whom you crucified." (2:36). Ouch. Jesus is Messiah and Lord and you—humans, not these humans in particular, but humans—crucified the Lord and Messiah.

They need a complete reorientation, rethinking, reconsideration of who they had understood Jesus to be. And it won't stop with just a new understanding and new orientation. It doesn't stop with just thoughts and feelings, though Acts tells us the hearers were "cut to the heart" by what Peter had told them. Thoughts and feelings can lead to repentance, but they aren't the end of the story.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-acts-214-36-41>

The congregation listening to Peter preach is so horrified by the crucifixion that they interrupt him. “What should we do?” What should we *do*? Remember that Acts quote from a minute ago: “Turn to God and *do deeds* consistent with repentance. Repentance has to lead to action or it isn’t really real. We all know it’s pretty easy to say we’re going to go for a nice, long walk every day. But it isn’t real unless we actually do it, and not just in April when the weather is lovely, but in August when we’re worn out by heat and humidity.

Peter tells them to repent and be baptized, and they are, 3000 of them, which is well outside our experience and maybe even outside our ability to comprehend. They respond with this initial action of repentance, a change in their thinking, and with baptism, a signal of their new orientation, and are ready to go and do. To act.

The rest of the book of Acts tells of, well, their actions. What they do, in response to hearing of Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection as Lord and Messiah. Next week’s scripture will give a couple of examples of how this new orientation to the world affects how they live—they will hold all possessions in common and dedicate themselves to worshiping in the Temple and breaking bread together.

Their repentance, their re-thinking and reorientation of their lives, is broad and deep and has implications for every single piece of their lives. Like being a camp founded in Christian theology has implications for every single piece of camp—accommodations, activities, meals, employees, campers.

Here we are, a couple of Sundays after Easter. We have once again heard the horror of the crucifixion, we have rejoiced in the wonder of the resurrection. We affirm each week that Jesus is both Messiah and Lord.

What should we do? How do we practice repentance, how do we reorient our lives so that following Jesus as Messiah and Lord has implications for everything we do?

Some of you are sermon title fans and you’ve been trying to figure out what the title has to do with anything I’ve said so far. The title comes from verse 39: “the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord God calls to him.” I think that is part of the answer to “What should we do?” We find those people whom the Lord God calls. They may be near and they may be far away, like the Prodigal Son was, far away in geography or morality or practices or appearance or orientation to life. And we tell and show those people about Jesus as Lord and Messiah, about repentance and forgiveness of sin, about lives that witness to our beliefs in each and every aspect. The promise is for us, for those closest to us, and for those who are yet far away. Let’s all draw close to that promise, through the spiritual practice and discipline of repentance.