

First Presbyterian Church

Marianna, Florida

Lenten Luncheon March 9, 2010

Reflections led by Huw Christopher, Pastor

Question for Reflection: “What Do You Want to Hold Out of the Water?”

Welcome and Opening Prayer:

Gracious God, we thank you for this opportunity during Lent to pause in the middle of this day to share this food and fellowship together, and most of all to reflect on who we are as your beloved children, and as the followers of Jesus Christ. Help us in our reflections together as they challenge us to look again at the course you would have us to follow as we seek to live out our true identity as your beloved children and as the faithful followers of Jesus Christ. Help us to seek your forgiveness for where we have steered off that course. Guide us to see more clearly where that course is leading us, and then give us the courage faithfully to walk in it, for your honor and glory, and for our own good as your beloved children and as the followers of Jesus Christ your Son, for it is in his name that we pray. Amen.

Today as we continue our Lenten reflections on our baptisms and our true identity as the beloved children of God and as the followers of Jesus Christ I would like to invite us to sing of the assurance that is ours as we remember the loving relationship with God that we have come to know through Jesus Christ. We will sing one of the favorite hymns of the ladies

in Circle 2, "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine," found at number 21 in the booklet. We will sing stanzas 1 and 2.

Unison Prayer:

Gracious God, we gather here to hear your word and to respond to it together. As we move deeper in this season of Lent, help us to be ready to ask hard questions, to listen for your voice, and to turn to you with all that we are. Give us ears to hear your word, eyes to see your face, and courage to follow the path you set before us. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

I wonder what came to your minds as you reflected on the question, "What Do You Want to Hold Out of the Water?" For some of you who are like myself and do not know how to swim your answer may well have been that the main thing you want to keep out of the water is your head, and that you certainly do not want to get in any water over your head.

As I thought about this question I also thought about this news article that a friend from our former church at Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina had sent me. It was a copy of an article that had appeared in the local paper back in September 1996 following Hurricane Fran that had flooded the whole of Wrightsville Beach. This was the first time that the whole of the island had been flooded in the ten years that Rachel and I had lived there, and was in fact the first occasion of such flooding since Hurricane Hazel in 1954. Rachel can share with you more of that amazing story as far as the church was concerned. One thing that the experience taught Rachel and myself, and many others on that island, was that if we had known that the water was going to rise as it did we would have moved many more things out of our first floor area to a higher floor. Rachel often

still thinks about those Christmas pageants and her piano and other furniture that we lost in those waters. Some of you who have been through floods may well be able like us to think of some of the things you would want to hold out of the water.

Some of you may have had some other thoughts as you reflected on this question, “What Do You Want to Hold Out of the Water?” For me this rather strange question was prompted by a story that Michael Lindvall shares in his Lenten study, *Pausing on the Road to Jerusalem*. He says, “There is an old tale from the story of the conversion of Europe that reports that an ancient pagan tribe of lusty warriors named the Franks was among the first of the Germans to be converted to Christianity. Like many tribes during this era, the Franks were converted to Jesus en masse, and they underwent group baptism by wading into a river to be baptized by the thousands. They understood what this meant at some level, that this would make them followers of a new king, Jesus. They understood that this Jesus was a Prince of Peace, doubtless an ironic title in their ears. The story has it that when these Frankish warriors came to be baptized in the waters of the Rhine they were careful to hold their swords above their heads and out of the waters of baptism, not to save them from rust but to keep them from Jesus, the Prince of Peace.”

As you think about that rather strange story I would like to invite you to read with me the words that some of us heard last Sunday of an incident in the life of Jesus as he was on his journey to Jerusalem.

A Reading from Luke 13:1-9:

Leader:

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.

Men

Jesus answered, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all the other Galileans?"

Women:

No! I tell you! But unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

Leader:

Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them

Men:

Do you think they were worse sinners than all the others living in Jerusalem?

Women:

No! I tell you! But unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

Leader:

Then Jesus told this parable: "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any.

Men:

So he said to the gardener, ' See here, for three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?'

Women:

Sir, leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.' "

The clear message of these words is that Jesus invites not just a few people who might be regarded as worse sinners, but all people, to repent. Certainly this was not the first time that he had given such an invitation, nor was it the first time that people would have heard such an invitation. I would invite you to read with me some of these previous invitations as they are written on the sheet.

A Reading from Matthew 3:1-2, Mark 1:3 and 14-15.

Leader:

Matthew tells us that in those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming,

People:

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

Leader:

Mark tells us that John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness,

People:

proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Leader:

Mark also reports that following his baptism and his temptation and after the arrest of John Jesus come to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying,

People:

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news.

What came to your mind in each of those passages, and the one we read earlier, when you heard the word, “repent.” This is word that we generally associate in these days with Bible thumping preachers that may stand on street corners, or carry placards which read, “Repent, the end is near.” Michael Lindvall suggests that the response that so often seems to be demanded is to “get on your knees, blurt out your sins, and say you’re sorry.” Such uses of this word often means that it is not generally part of our vocabulary as people who participate in mainline congregations. But handing over this word, “repent” to those who frequently are seen to be on

the more fanatical fringes of the church means that we so often do not appreciate what this invitation is saying to us. The Greek word, *metanoia* which is generally translated as repent literally means “to turn around.” It means to “do a 180.” If you’re going east and do a *metanoia*, now you’re going west. If you’re going south and do a *metanoia*, now you’re going north. *Metanoia* speaks of doing a U-Turn with your life. The point is that if we “repent and believe in the Gospel,” we are not just listing our sins; we are charting a new course for our lives. It is through this course that Jesus invites us to find our true identity as his followers. For some people, of course, repentance does mean such a 180-degree course correction, as their lives have been so geared away from God and from Jesus Christ that affirming faith in God’s love in Jesus Christ is a radical departure from their old way of living and acting. For some of us, of course, it is more of a course correction as we pause to look at our lives and to ask what am I trying to hold out of the water rather than committing to Jesus Christ. Lent is a time to pause and to look at our lives as the followers of Jesus Christ and to ask, “What am I trying to hold out of the water so Jesus does not get hold of it, and I do not have to commit it to him even as I claim to be his follower?” For some people it may be saying, “I want to follow Jesus but my career is more important than being his follower.” For some it may be saying, “I want to follow Jesus but my family really takes first place in my life not Jesus.” For some it may be saying, “I want to follow Jesus but my pastimes, my sports, my hunting, my bridge, are far more important to me than Jesus in my life.” For some it may be saying, “I want to follow Jesus but I don’t want the waters of baptism to touch my wallet or my pocketbook or my bank accounts.”

As we hear Jesus say that unless people are ready to repent they too will perish we are reminded that our true identity as the beloved children of

God will indeed begin to perish and to die the more we try to keep out of the waters of baptism, and by so doing are saying, “Yes, I want to be a follower of Jesus but I still want to cling on to these things and not let him control these aspects of my life.” The radical metanoia may have come for many of us years ago as we made our professions of faith confirming the vows our parents made for us in our baptisms, or as we were baptized on the basis of our own professions of faith. But as we use the Season of Lent with fellow Christians to remember our baptisms, to remember who we are as the beloved children of God, we are prompted to look again at how we are living up to our true identity as God’s beloved children, and as the followers of Jesus Christ. For us the course we are taking and the directions in which we are living may call for course corrections if we are going to experience more of our true identity as the beloved children of God, and as the followers of Jesus. As you look at your life what are some of those things that you are still wanting to keep out of the water? What are some of those things over which you are still wanting to keep control rather than dedicating them to God to be used in his service? As we move through Lent may all of us use this time to examine our lives to see those areas where we still need to repent, to relinquish control and allow Jesus truly to guide us in the use that we make of those aspects of our lives.

As you think about what it means to you to repent I would like to invite you to read with me from the sheet the definition that Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian minister and novelist gives of the word repentance in his book, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*.

“To repent is to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, “I’m sorry,” than to the future and saying, “Wow!” (*Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* Harper and Row, 1973)

Lent gives us an opportunity to pause and to reflect more on our true identity as the beloved children of God and as the followers of Jesus. As we do so, may each of us come to exclaim more of that “wow” in our lives, as we remember that Jesus said the real reason we should want to repent is not that we might accept the bad news about ourselves, but that we might believe the good news, the gospel, of who God has said we are. Remember who you are, and experience more of that exciting “Wow” that God wants you to know in your life.

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Question, Reflections and Reading for next Tuesday, March 16:

What Does Home Mean to You?

- Reflections on God’s Welcome to Us as the Followers of Jesus Christ
- Reading from Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Closing Prayer:

Loving and Merciful God, we look at the world around us and sometimes we wonder where you are. Remind us that you are here, among us, in us, all around us, and that you call us to turn fully towards you. Help us to release all that hinders us and to enter into your waters of baptism with all that we have and with all that we are. Help us to do it today and each and every day, confident of each and every one of your promises to us on which we can stand, for we ask these things in the name of Jesus Christ, your Son, Amen.

Closing Hymn No. 39 “Standing on the Promises of God” Stanzas 1 and 4