

## ***Metanoia Moments***

**Matthew 3:1-12**

When Nelson Mandela died the other day, the entire world lost the presence of one of the more remarkable leaders and sages of history, and not just for our time. Around the world, tributes have lauded Mandela's example and courage—who, for nearly a century of life, embodied the human quest for freedom and reconciliation. None of this is surprising, since “Madiba” (or “father” as he is often called) has not only been honored as the inspirational icon of the anti-apartheid movement, but for his capacity to lead by example in forgiving those who wronged him.

I recall the various grassroots campaigns beginning roughly around the time of the Soweto uprising in the mid 1970s—protestors and activists from Congress to congregations to colleges—condemning apartheid and Mandela's imprisonment. I recall hearing firsthand accounts from my friend, Ivor Jenkins, a Baptist pastor and human rights activist from Pretoria, who led a campaign against police oppression and abuses by the security forces during the decade leading up to Mandela's eventual release—including the day when his own home was shot up by machine-gun toting paramilitaries. The drama of the fight against apartheid so often paralleled the struggle for civil rights and racial equality in our own country that Mandela seemed to be a moral successor to Martin Luther King, Jr.

When Mandela was finally released in February 1990, the expectation held by many was that Madiba would take up arms and lead the ANC in a bloody civil war, returning to the ruling white minority the type of brutality he and the black majority suffered for

decades. On many levels, the next few years were difficult and bloody. But Mandela recognized the moral arc of history was now bending toward justice and chose not to make new victims of his enemies, but instead partners for peace. With international support, the opportunity presented itself for a negotiated settlement for multiracial democratic elections for the country and the creation of a coalition government that would work on national unity. When the elections were held in 1994, Mandela became President and a pathway for justice was pursued with the Truth and Reconciliation process—a courageous pursuit of justice that brought transparency to the crimes of the previous regimes without the tenor of vengeance or severe punishment, ultimately saving the very souls of all races and peoples in South Africa.

As Mandela told the European parliament:

Great anger and violence can never build a nation. We are striving to proceed in a manner and towards a result, which will ensure that all our people, both black and white, emerge as victors.

In a period when past injustices could have resulted in a new wave of violence out of resentment and retaliation, the emerging black leadership of South Africa followed the wisdom of their elder statesman:

Reconciliation means working together to correct the legacy of past injustice. ...

If there are dreams about a beautiful South Africa, there are also roads that lead to this goal. Two of the roads could be named Goodness and Forgiveness. ...

For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.

What is widely admired is that, after decades of imprisonment, Mandela chose to heal his land than to settle a score. His willingness to forgive his enemies after all of the suffering, abuse, racism, and injustice he and his people were dealt became his crowning achievement and legacy as one of the truly great figures of humankind. His choice, courage, and commitment to take a higher moral road in order to do what was best for his country will endure as a profound example of spiritual righteousness for our generation. It was a remarkable moment of *metanoia*—the Greek word for repenting and turning away from what would be expected.

As we reflect upon Nelson Mandela's life and legacy this weekend, how fitting it all seems in the context and spirit of Advent. The ancient biblical texts from the prophets to the opening chapters of the Gospels proclaim the same message that Mandela provided through his wisdom and example. *Metanoia* in our lives as individuals and as whole societies is required before we can embrace and embody the character and qualities associated with the biblical understanding of justice and peace. In short, you can't be truly good or free unless you are willing to forsake what our baser human nature will often lead us to do and be. You can't make the sacrifices necessary for peace if you are still driven by a consuming fire of rage, bitterness, and resentment. You can't bring justice to a setting if it is fueled by retaliation and condemnation. You can't create a promising future if you are unwilling to let go of the destructive record of the past.

It takes *metanoia* moments of clear-minded decision-making to turn our lives around from repeating the mistakes of the past and the

destructive patterns imbedded in who we are as territorial beings and protective and aggressive animals. It's a natural survival instinct within us to protect our own interests, even if it means inflicting harm on others who have harmed us. To not react in kind takes a measure of control, wisdom, and selflessness too often absent from stressful situations calling for a response. More often than not, it takes a moment of spiritual clarity to actually calculate the consequences of our actions and then courage to act in ways that do not immediately satisfy our justified rage.

Whether we're speaking of personal grudges or global conflicts or everything that falls in between, an act of repentance for the deep desire to harm another person is what turns things around toward a redemptive direction, which is preferable to reckoning with the consequences when you give into retaliatory forms of justice. Those moments of decision—of making a choice of what one will do—can either bring about healing and hope or add to the pain and suffering. As Mandela said on more than one occasion: “Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies.” What a brilliant insight; resentment doesn't harm your enemies as much as it harms you! It's like drinking poison. But so many are willing to drink that poison because it satisfies for a fleeting moment the yearning for power and control over those you seek to punish. But retaliation doesn't result in justice; it only perpetuates injustice.

That's why from prophets of old to those of today, we are called to stop what we're doing, take account of what is going on (either as individuals or collectively), see things differently with eyes of heaven toward a more hopeful and healing result, and turn everything

around toward that which is good! That's repentance in the biblical sense—it's a *metanoia* moment of accountability, self-awareness, wisdom seeking, and corrective action aiming toward a better result. Repentance has as much to do with how we function as a society as it does our personal moral sins and misgivings in life. For that's when *metanoia* moments are far more consequential, far more impactful, and far more meaningful, and capture the true spirit of Advent.

To appreciate repentance in this larger sense, all we have to do is revisit the text of the morning of John the Baptist's mission in the wilderness. John is presented as an Elijah-like prophet proclaiming the truth of God to the people of Judea. But it wasn't a religious act per se—not the “come to Jesus” moment that Christian revivalists have made it out to be, where individuals come out and offer confession, say a few prayers of repentance, and then get baptized in order to gain access to eternal life. John wouldn't have created a stir over doing that; personal repentance already was their religious duty whenever they went to the temple. They confessed their sins, asked forgiveness from God, offered a sacrifice handled by the priests, and cleared their conscience. That was a normal act of piety.

What set John apart was that he was calling for a change of heart for his entire society—repentance in a setting where Rome occupied their homeland with oppressive and often segregationist policies, where King Herod and his supporters among the elite of Judean society colluded with the imperial power in order to keep their place and their wealth, where those who were oppressed on the underside of society often turned to banditry or violence to rebel against Rome's stranglehold on their land, and all through the

political system and marketplace, corruption and abuse abounded. In other words, it was a world similar to ours and to South Africa and to every place where the gaps between the powerful and powerless and the rich and the poor are enormous, and where the cries for justice often fall on deaf ears.

That is precisely why John called his people out into the wilderness—the place where their ancestors roamed prior to reaching Canaan—in order to reset their concept of Israel under God. Baptism, for John, was a radical act of defiance against the injustices and violence of the Judean world, poisoned by Rome’s domination—the cleansing waters symbolic of a *metanoia* moment in each person’s life not to contribute to, nor support, nor passively ignore, or tolerate the systemic evil of their time! John defied the ruling class, as well as violent rebel movements with his baptism and call to change their ways before they destroy their lives and their nation! It was to be a *metanoia* moment!

That’s what *metanoia* moments are for: to save us from ourselves before we are destroyed by our own actions. Repentance for the wrong that has been done, for the direction one’s life and one’s society is taking, must occur before even the wisdom and spirit of Jesus will ever take root or even matter to us. We have to be willing to stop the destructive things we do and say that preclude and prevent any real understanding of the Gospel, i.e., that which leads to true and lasting reconciliation, justice, and peace. That’s how the Gospel saves us—by turning us around and toward that which is good.

I think about this as later this week we come up on the anniversary of the Newtown tragedy. I wonder if we are missing our

*metanoia* moment as a society, particularly in response to gun violence. I wanted to believe that this was a watershed moment—a real *metanoia* turning around, where we would emerge from the sorrow with a new commitment to reduce gun violence in America. I know several of us have become involved in anti-gun campaigns and joined the thousands who have signed onto the Sandy Hook Promise.

But we who have done this are not the ones buying guns or arming ourselves beyond reason. If you look at the data on FBI background checks (required for most gun purchases), they actually are rising at a record pace in 2013, meaning more guns are being purchased by Americans over the last twelve months than at any other time!<sup>1</sup> It's due, I'm sure, to the scare tactics that the gun lobby has employed, particularly in reference to new gun laws possibly being enacted. But it also reveals the underlying anger and fear in our society.

Likewise, have we even addressed mental health issues in any meaningful way over the past year, or any of the other issues related to gun violence? One wonders, is there any evidence that American society has learned a significant lesson and tried to alter the trends that contributed to what occurred in Newtown? Many other societies don't live in such fear and violence. What will it take for us to change our ways? What will it cost us before we're willing to repent from this terrible scourge upon our world?

When Nelson Mandela won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993, along with his colleague in peacemaking, then South African

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<sup>1</sup> Zach Carter, "Gun Sales Exploded in the Year After Newtown Shooting," *Huffington Post*, December 6, 2013.

President F. W. de Klerk for ending apartheid, his acceptance speech in Oslo included these compelling comments:

We speak here of the challenge of the dichotomies of war and peace, violence and non-violence, racism and human dignity, oppression and repression and liberty and human rights, poverty and freedom from want.

We stand here today as nothing more than a representative of the millions of our people who dared to rise up against a social system whose very essence is war, violence, racism, oppression, repression and the impoverishment of an entire people. ...

These countless human beings, both inside and outside our country, had the nobility of spirit to stand in the path of tyranny and injustice, without seeking selfish gain. They recognized that an injury to one is an injury to all and therefore acted together in defense of justice and a common human decency.

That expresses very well a *metanoia* spirit of genuine change in South Africa, so long burdened by systemic violence and oppression. By acting on that and committing themselves to what it takes to create a new future for their people and not repeat the sins of the past, we now honor this great man—the “father” of their new nation—in tribute for leading his people to a new day and for bringing about a good that has profoundly altered the course of human history.

Nelson Mandela represents the change of heart and the good we can all do to save ourselves and our world from further destruction. That is a legacy to embrace and emulate in the spirit of Advent, in the hope of the Gospel, and in the ultimate reign of the Prince of Peace.

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