

**ADVENT – SECOND SUNDAY YEAR C 2009 HOMILY**  
**(Baruch 5:1-9; Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11; Luke 3:1-6)**

**REPENT A LITTLE!**

A few weeks ago, I made my annual retreat. For over twenty-five years now, I have gone to the Abbey of Gethsemani near Bardstown, KY for this prayerful time away. This is the Trappist monastery where the famous monk Thomas Merton (d. 1968) lived and prayed and worked. I have often made this trip with priest-friends from Columbus unless I went by myself. This year I had the opportunity to go with an old friend from my graduate school days at the University of Minnesota. This guy, Fr, Tom, is one of my oldest friends and someone I really admire. They don't come any better than Tom.

It is interesting that both of us ended up in the priesthood. After we got to know each other, we realized that we both had a pretty deep spiritual side. One thing led to another and we decided almost at the same time to follow our hearts and become priests. I always say that Tom went off the deep end and entered a Religious order. He became a Capuchin Franciscan and saw the world. I took the easy way out and became a diocesan priest. It is probably fair to say that, if we had not met, neither of us would have followed this vocation – and this is something I think about often. God is always at work trying to get us to do what, deep down, we want to do anyway; and God used Tom's and my friendship to get us to do the Father's will. Neither Tom nor I have ever looked back.

But both of us had a little repentance to do before we could say yes to God. Although I had always been faithful to the church, I had not taken my faith seriously for some time. I would go to Sunday Mass out of habit, but would not pay much attention to prayer and works of charity during the week. I was a decent guy with quite a few good friends, but I was into having a great time and not too much else. I was not a big sinner or anything, but a lukewarm Catholic at best. I had also once considered the priesthood when I was right out of high school; but after one year of college seminary, I bailed out because I thought at the time I might be called to marriage.

When I met Tom, things began to change. I realized right away that he was a better man than I and he had a positive influence on me the way friends can have. I even began to think of being a priest again. After resisting this idea for as long as I could, I finally said yes to my vocation one day around this time of year in a church named St. Olaf in downtown Minneapolis where I had gone for daily Mass. This fall I had a chance to go back to Minnesota for a reunion with some other friends and to take in a game at the university's new stadium. We went to Sunday Mass at St. Olaf and I had the opportunity to thank God for pestering me until I came around to his will.

Although Tom was a really good person, he did not go to church when I first met him. It took some time for this to change, but eventually he started coming to Sunday Mass. This happened after I had left school and was working at a small college called St. John's University, sponsored by the Benedictine Order, which was located in Collegeville in central Minnesota. There was a nearby convent of Benedictine nuns and I loved their beautiful chapel and would often go to Mass there. I got to know the sisters and I remember asking them to pray that my friend Tom would go back to Mass. Shortly after this, he did. Then not too long after, he too decided to be a priest.

The rest is history, as they say. Both Tom and I wrestled with giving up on marriage, but in the end this was not even that hard. Both of us have had happy lives as priests. As I said, Tom went off the deep end. As a Capuchin Franciscan, he spent a lot of time in Central America (where I visited him once in Honduras) and he has really had a life of adventure and done a lot of good. He is now fluent in Spanish, French, and Portuguese which serves him well in his poor parish in the lower east side of Manhattan. Yes, Fr. Tom is now a pastor and he loves it.

Both Tom and I made a little change in our lives and this enabled us, by God's grace, to embrace his loving will.

And I think that this little change or this little repentance is what ties in to the Advent season. Here were two young men who did not make a radical change because we were not wayward persons to begin with. We always like those kinds of seemingly dramatic stories. Like St. Augustine or Thomas Merton himself, who turned from sin to sanctity! But rather Tom and I were like countless others (like most of you, probably), and I think that this is what makes our stories relevant. We were not evil people, but rather good people who simply made some changes in our lives under the influence of grace.

And this little change for the better is something we can all understand. There are very few of us who are wicked and wild. We're good people. But because of being good people, we often kind of turn aside the voice that calls us further – like the voice that kept calling me and Tom to something more. I came across the prayer of a man named Michel Quoist, who has written some very fine books of prayers (among other things), and his prayer goes like this:

Lord, here I am, not feeling sinful.  
I don't do dreadful things like stabbing  
people, stealing or mugging. I try to  
help people and love them. I suppose I  
don't help the right people in the right  
way. Probably I trust myself more than  
you. So help me to see what you would  
like changed in me. There must be  
something. Help me to feel sinful, if this  
is what you want.

The point of his prayer is that he's a good man. He keeps the commandments. He loves his neighbor. He goes to church on Sunday. He's good. But he also suspects that goodness is kind of a shield from deeper commitment to prayer and to love and to mission. And he speaks, therefore, on behalf of good people like us here in church today. Michel Quoist speaks to you and me. What would God want changed in my life or yours as a good person during this Advent? That's the question that comes out of the Scripture.

What does a prophet like John the Baptist say to me? What does repentance mean to me? Not repentance from a horrible life to a good life, but rather repentance from a good life to something deeper. You see, what John and the Scripture are saying to us is that we carry within us a subtle defense against deeper holiness. Most of us could indeed say: "I guess outside of the usual human failings, I'm a good person. I really don't go

around mugging people and stabbing them.” But then, you see, we treat God in the negative. We are saying, in effect, “I don’t do the horrible things; therefore I’m relieved from doing the better things.”

And the Scripture confronts us and won’t let us get away with that. People like Fr. Tom and I came to the point in our young lives where we had to ask ourselves: “Are you listening to something better, more profound?” We were good people who changed a little. And that’s our message today. As good people, what would God really like to see changed a little in our lives? Where could we be called to a deeper level, a profound holiness and difference? And we can make a difference!

A few years ago at a meeting of the St. Paul’s Men’s Prayer Breakfast, we were reflecting on what little things Christians could do to make a difference. One of the men that morning told a story of an incident he observed in the check out line at the supermarket. A senior couple came to check out and it turned out they didn’t have enough money to pay for their groceries. They began, somewhat embarrassed, to discuss what they could do without – what they could take back. At this point, the gentleman behind them in line simply took out a bill from his wallet and gave the money to the older man and said: “I believe this belongs to you.”

This incident reminds us that it’s the little things that matter (as St. Therese the Little Flower has taught us). Advent reminds us that it is the little things that add up to repentance and to a change of heart. St. John the Baptist in our gospel today (from Luke) reminds us to prepare the way of the Lord. The kind man in the checkout line was so sensitive and compassionate. When he took out the money and said, “I believe this is yours,” no truer words were ever spoken because, when someone is in need, what we have belongs to them. Everything we have is a gift from God and if we can help someone, we are obliged to do so. And this generosity helps us to repent and grow. And it helps us to prepare the way of the Lord in our hearts and in our world.

So this Advent, repent a little and be converted a little – just a little, it doesn’t have to be a lot! As my friend Tom once taught me and as the man in the supermarket and so many good people teach us, it’s the small acts of thoughtfulness that change communities and, indeed, the world. These all add up to the bigger repentance that the Baptist calls for in the gospel for this Second Sunday of Advent. So this week, repent a little. It will make a big difference.