

ADVENT SECOND SUNDAY YEAR A 2010 HOMILY

(Isaiah 11: 1-10; Romans 15: 4-9; Matthew 3: 1-12)

REPENTANCE IS FORGIVENESS AND PEACE

A Christian theologian named Stanley Hauerwas (1940-) relates a true story about “an Amish family – a father, a mother, and their teenage son – riding along, as was their custom, in a horse-drawn buggy. Behind them came a car filled with rowdy and impatient young people. Annoyed at the slow-moving carriage, they honked the horn and waved their fists in aggravation. Finally, in a swirl of dust, they rushed around the Amish. As they passed, one of the young men in the car hurled a stone in the direction of the horse, hoping just to harass the family. Instead, the stone hit the Amish boy in the head, killing him instantly. The town was outraged, and the young man came to trial for manslaughter. To everyone’s amazement, the parents of the slain teenager, still crippled by grief, appeared to testify on behalf of the stone-thrower. Despite this testimony, the young man was condemned and sent to prison. Now, every month, the Amish parents come to the jail and visit their son’s slayer, comforting him, encouraging him, seeking to bring him back eventually into the community.” (Quoted in Robert Barron: *The Strangest Way*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 2002, p. 110)

The Amish have that forgiveness thing down, as we know from other stories like this one. They also have the peace thing down, as we know from their history. And both the forgiveness thing and the peace thing are related to the repentance thing that John the Baptist preaches in today’s Gospel from St. Matthew.

Repentance is radically a matter of repairing relationships. We might mistakenly think it has something more to do with all-night prayer vigils or fasting or making pilgrimages. All of these have their place, but they are valid Christian practices only if they are undertaken with the aim of seeking and granting forgiveness and with the aim of achieving the peace that comes from such forgiveness. St. John the Baptist is a scary figure here in St. Matthew’s Gospel where he threatens hell-fire to the sinners he is seeking to convert through confession and his Baptism of Repentance. But what sin is there that does not hurt oneself or one’s neighbor? Sometimes people – maybe all of us at times – try to fool ourselves into thinking that some wrongdoing done in private hurts no one. But we are lying to ourselves the way Satan lied to Adam and Eve – and we know it. Advent is the time to heed the Baptist’s cry to repent in order to prepare once again the way of the Lord at Christmas and for the rest of our lives. Repentance opens our hearts to receive Christ the way Mary received him into her womb – the Christ who came to make forgiveness possible.

But, my o my, how we are tempted seek revenge! How we are tempted to turn away from the strange but necessary path of our Amish brothers and sisters! There was a story in the news this week about a young Muslim man who wanted to blow up people at a Christmas-tree lighting ceremony in Portland, Oregon. The FBI caught him in a sting operation. This tale of hate was compounded when someone set fire to the mosque where the young Muslim occasionally worshipped, despite the fact that his coreligionists condemned what he wanted to do just as almost everyone else in the country condemned it. And who knows when this cycle of vengeance will end? The Amish family in the story which Professor

Hauerwas related above knew instinctively what it takes to end the syndrome of violence – it takes forgiveness. It is the only way. Forgiveness is the fruit of repentance and peace is the fruit of forgiveness.

In the beautiful first reading for this Mass from the prophet Isaiah, the writer gives us a vision of the peace that flows from justice. It is the familiar Advent vision of the lamb giving hospitality to the wolf and the cow and the bear being neighborly and the baby playing by the cobra's den. Of course, this text is a metaphor for a world transformed by God's grace – a world open to repentance and forgiveness. It is beside the point to say that it is naïve to think things can really be so peaceful and people and nature can be in harmony. The world to come will be marked by peace and love and those who have repented and learned how to forgive will be at home there. So the point is that it all starts here with our attitude and our openness to God and His Christ.

And when we think that the forgiveness necessary to bring about Isaiah's vision is impossible, we hear a story like the Amish family who visit their son's killer every single month without fail. And that story is not unique. This week there was another news item about a man in Cincinnati who lost his leg in an accident when a woman on drugs hit him with her car as he rode his motorcycle. The judge in the case was ready to throw the book at the lady; but to the judge's amazement, the victim pleaded for leniency because he did not want to take a mother away from her three children. The judge gave her long probation and an extensive rehabilitation program instead of a lengthy jail sentence. The judge remarked on the victim's unusual compassion. And the man himself who at a young age had lost his leg told of the wrestling match that went on in his heart between vengeance and forgiveness. Forgiveness won and the world became a better place.

This man's compassion moved us a little closer to Isaiah's vision of a world made new. I am not saying that forgiveness is easy. It is not easy for me. But it is more than possible by God's grace. And it all begins with repentance and it all leads to a more peaceful planet. And Advent is a good time to get the ball rolling. The Baptist tells us to repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Yes, this kingdom is among us because this kingdom is the forgiving Christ and we are his Body.