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**Covenant Presbyterian Church**  
**Racine, WI**  
**Luke 3:1-18**  
**Sermon: *Changing Our Minds***  
**December 12, 2021**

The summer after I graduated from seminary I was working at a church in downtown Chicago. I started in July and in my second week on the job, I was on my way to the airport to take a bunch of high school kids, who I had just met, on a mission trip. But this was not a typical mission work trip. It was an educational immersion trip coordinated by an agency called Borderlinks on the border of Mexico in Arizona. Borderlinks' mission is to help people understand the complexity and challenges of immigration. I had never been on an educational immersion trip before, so I really didn't know what to expect.

What it meant was that we spent almost the entire week meeting people and hearing their stories. We met people from all different sides of the issue. We met border patrol agents and local government officials, people who employed immigrants, people who dealt with gangs and drug trafficking, people who had crossed the border and were living and working in the US, and people who had been caught crossing and sent back. We met people who had been cheated by coyotes and people who had been separated from their family and people who were desperate and willing to do anything to make a better life for themselves.

It was a very full week of listening and trying to understand. And because of that trip, every time I hear a talking head on TV or read a report about immigration, I think of those real people I met, and I remember their stories, and nothing seems quite as black or white as the news makes it out to be. Knowing people's real stories – the stories about their lives, their faith, their hopes, their struggles – complicated my own understanding, and makes it much harder for me to see things from only one perspective. Which is the point of an education immersion trip because getting to know other people's stories is far more likely to cause us to change our minds about things than facts or what we watch on TV.

I thought of that trip a lot this week as I read about John the Baptist out in the wilderness preaching to crowds about repentance. We typically think about

repentance as admitting guilt for something and trying to make amends. But a truer definition of repentance, especially the Greek word John uses, *metanoia*, is to change one's mind or to turn a different way.

So, when John preached about repentance, he was preaching about the need for people to change their minds, which in turn would hopefully change their behavior. John was preparing people for the big ways Jesus was going to ask them to change their minds, especially about who was in and who was out. So, he told the crowds that the one who was coming to save them was not coming just for children of Abraham, or in other words, just for the Jews. And not only was this new way going to be for people outside their faith tradition, but this salvation would be even for people they saw as enemies, as traitors like tax collectors and soldiers. And, by changing their minds about who is in and who is out (newsflash: everyone is in) John wanted them to see that they would need to change their behavior - to live with a greater understanding of community and to not hoard resources, but share generously with others - all others, not just their family or friends. This was, and still is, a big change of mind.

Which got me thinking about how peoples' minds are changed. These days there seems to be such a rigidity in what people believe. So many of us hold our beliefs so tightly, clenching them with tight fists, sure of our rightness. Many of us listen to others on edge - just waiting for them to say something we disagree with. And when our beliefs are challenged it is easy to go straight to anger, self-righteousness. Confronted with someone who feels differently about any of a range of issues, we find ourselves shutting down, or thinking only of our rebuttal, or frantically googling for information that will back up our side of things, or even lashing out with insults, which means there is very little listening to each other happening.

And it doesn't help that changing one's mind is often labeled as a weakness. We call people who change their minds flip-floppers. And sometimes this is for good reasons. We have witnessed a lot of people publicly change their minds for what seem like only self-serving purposes, rather than a true change of mind but for political convenience, or to go along with prevailing trends to be popular. But there are good reasons, strong reasons, brave reasons to have one's mind changed and to be willing to repent of a previous position.

But complicating this even more, because of the news we listen to, our social media accounts, the friends and family we choose to interact with, many of us find ourselves in silos or echo chambers with only people who agree with us and never ask or challenge us to change our minds. And the more of a silo we find ourselves in, the greater the fear of and anger towards people outside of our group grows. You only have to google things like “how to talk to someone with whom I disagree” to find a wealth of articles on the subject because talking to people with different ideas or opinions has become so fraught with fear and anger.

But the news and social media perpetuate advertising this fear because there is profit to be made in polarizing us, in making us afraid of one another, in getting us worked up in fear and anxiety. Many popular news sources, often better described as entertainment, use only the most extreme examples on every issue, tell only the most tragic stories, set up conversations where the entire point is to start an argument. That kind of news hooks us and stokes our rigidity - confirming we are right and assuring us we are not the problem. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy - a cycle of confirmation for our fear and an excuse to “other” those who disagree with us. And this is far more successful in getting us to tune in or click than through stories of neighbors helping each other, people doing the right thing, people forgiving each other or working together despite differences.

Moreover, we are not eager to change our minds, because it is hard. To admit we have been wrong; to realize we need to change paths; to realize we didn't know as much as we thought we did is hard. And that is why it is a spiritual discipline, a part of our faith, to be willing to change our minds when the Holy Spirit moves us, or when God shows us something new, or when our eyes have been opened and our hearts expanded through an experience where we see something more of God's love and purpose in the world. Which God often does through our connections with each other, in our encounters with strangers, in the opportunities we have to hear each other's stories.

At the very least, when we hear other people's stories it complicates things for us in the best of ways - it makes them real to us, not just an “other” to be demonized or fearful of. It forces us to acknowledge the gray of things rather than seeing everything so black and white. It invites us to consider we may not be as right as we thought, even if we aren't completely wrong either. It makes us think twice before letting generalized insults escape our lips and helps us to imagine life in

someone else's shoes. There is very little that moves the needle of compassion in our hearts and is capable of changing our minds like being in close proximity to someone we consider strange or fearful or wrong.

If we stay in our silos and hold rigidly to our own beliefs as the only possible truth, we will have far fewer opportunities to experience repentance. And that may seem easier. Repentance is hard, letting go of things we've held tightly can be painful, sometimes there is grief in changing course and leaving something else behind, sometimes we may feel ashamed about what we didn't understand or refused to hear before and about things we've said and done. Repentance does often require us to make amends and apologize and sometimes it just needs us to move forward differently. But God doesn't call us into a practice of repentance to punish us, shame us or have us live in grief. God calls us to repentance so we would know more joy. What? Yes, repentance can bring us to greater joy.

Last week in my sermon I mentioned that fear is the opposite of peace - our fears keep us from having peace in our hearts and peace in our relationships. Fear also keeps us from joy. Fear gnaws away at joy. And silos and echo chambers only create more fear and smaller and smaller groups. Fear creates more rigidity. And every time we decide to hold on hard to being right means that other people must be wrong. And the more people that are wrong, the more people there are to stay disconnected from, afraid of what happens if we engage - afraid that either we might find ourselves in terrible, uncomfortable conflict or afraid that they might actually cause us to change our minds.

And yes, there may be conflict and disagreements, in fact, there definitely will be, but community and relationship are also what breeds joy. When we listen to each other's stories, when we allow our lives to be complicated by each other's stories, joy shows up - joy in recognizing the things we have in common, joy in seeing God through someone else's eyes; joy in moments of compassion, empathy, and love. And joy is a central part of our faith, especially at Christmas.

The Christmas angels bring a message they say is good news of great JOY for all people. The point of Christmas is joy. Matthew Myer Bolton says this of the connection between joy and Christmas:

“Christmas begins in hope against hope and it’s end goal is peace, but the heart of Christmas is joy. When good news comes your way, and you truly receive it, you respond by rejoicing. And so, if there is no rejoicing then no good news has been received and Christmas is nothing if not good news of great joy for all people. Without joy, without gladness, love falls flat. Faith is hollow. Hope and peace go grim and grey and so do our lives. Joy is the secret of vitality itself.”

If we want to be people of good news and great joy, we will need to repent. Not just once, but again and again. We will have to stay open to the idea of changing our minds, changing direction, discovering we aren’t as right as we once thought. We will need to believe that sometimes the Holy Spirit puts us in uncomfortable situations so we will learn something new, and that God puts people into our path who do not agree with us but who may have something for us to learn.

So, in the hopes of finding more joy and helping to create more joy in our lives and in the world, John the Baptist invites us to spend some time this Advent thinking about the things for which we need to repent. And a good way to do this is to step out of our silos and seek out each other’s stories with curiosity and love and rather than focusing on debating and defending, and to really listen to each other. And what will be the good fruit of repentance? A change in our behavior. John tells the people to share what they have, to use their positions of power with care and to be ready for the one who is coming to change everything about how we see one another. If we were to do that, imagine how much joy there would be.

May this be an Advent full of hope and peace, love, and joy, but may it be that way because we are willing to repent, to change our minds, to be transformed, to change our behaviors, to see each other with more compassion. Let it be said of us that we preferred being loving to being right and that we chose repentance over rigidity. Amen.