2018-01-21 “Repent and Believe” by Michael Cheuk

Mark 1:14-20; Jonah 3:1-10; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus himself also proclaimed “repent and believe” as he began his earthly ministry. But before Jesus called for repentance and belief, He made this proclamation: “The *time* has come, the kingdom of God is near.” The word Jesus used for “time” is *kairos,* a Greek word used to describe not chronological time, but an opportune or right time. Or “the appointed time,” as Paul puts it in our reading from 1 Corinthians. One could say that in the Bible, *kairos* is the term used for *God’s time*, a decisive time ushering the in-breaking of God’s presence into our lives and our world. *Kairos* moments can be positive or negative. *Kairos* moments occur when you have the opportunity to take stock and make a change that will affect the rest of your life.

My time as pastor of Farmville Baptist Church was a *Kairos* moment for me. As you know, Farmville is the county seat of Prince Edward county. During 1959 to 1964, the Prince Edward county Board of Supervisors chose to close all public schools rather than integrating them per the Supreme Court ruling Brown vs. Board of Education. Prince Edward was the only school district in the country that closed their school for such a long time – five years! During this turbulent time, Farmville Baptist was caught up in the community’s struggle with desegregation. In July of 1963, twenty three black demonstrators were refused entrance into the church during worship and were subsequently arrested.[[1]](#footnote-1) This event prompted Donald Baker, a *Washington Post* staff writer, to label Farmville Baptist a “bastion of white supremacy” in a March 2001 article.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Yet, in 2005, Farmville Baptist called me to be their pastor. When I met with Farmville Baptist’s Pastor Search Committee, at the end of the interview, I asked this question of the committee members: I’ve read the history of Prince Edward County, and I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I’m Chinese. Is that going to be a problem?” “No,” they replied, without missing a beat. And they were right! As I lived and served among the members of Farmville Baptist, as I got to know them better, I discovered that the church simply was *not* a bastion of white supremacy. There were many members who were committed to racial reconciliation. And in the history of Farmville Baptist, even during the racial unrest of the 50’s and 60’s, there were courageous members and pastors who stood up against white supremacy.

Learning the history of Farmville and Farmville Baptist was a *kairos* moment for me. Prior to Farmville, I had a very superficial understanding of the black experience. And even though I’m an immigrant and should have known better, I had bought into some of the stereotypes that our society placed on African-Americans. In Farmville, I became more awake and aware of the injustices faced by my black brothers and sisters.

Recently, now back in Charlottesville, I learned that the Robert E. Lee statue in Charlottesville was inaugurated on May 21, 1924, “during a gala Confederate reunion” in which a large Confederate flag draping the statue was pulled away to great cheers by the three-year-old great-granddaughter of General Lee, Mary Walker Lee.[[3]](#footnote-3) The statue was placed in a park in which blacks were forbidden to enter. I also learned how in 1965, the City of Charlottesville demolished and dismantled homes, businesses and gathering places owned by blacks in the Vinegar Hill neighborhood. Many black residents of Vinegar Hill were blocked from voting on their own homes destruction because of a hefty poll tax.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This Kairos experience led me to repentance. The word repentance in the Greek is *metanoia*, which literally means “to change one’s mind.” So, what does repentance look like? For many, repentance is merely feeling sorry or guilty for the wrong things one has done. But according to Mike Breen, repentance is less about feeling guilty and more about taking these three steps: **observation** of the *kairos* moment, **reflection** on one’s actions, and **discussion** with others about it.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In other words, repentance is not a feeling, but an action that involves observation and reflection of one’s actions, and confession within a spiritual community. For me, repentance -- the changing of my mind -- came about through learning about the history of Farmville and Charlottesville, having discussions with many who were affected by discriminatory laws and policies. For me, repentance also arose from reflecting on how I would respond in light of this new knowledge.

According to Jesus, repentance is only the first step. It is not enough to repent, to have a change of mind by observing, reflecting and discussing. According to Jesus, one must also *believe*. We often think of belief as having right thoughts. But in the Bible, “belief” is more than just intellectual assent; it also involves a corresponding change in behavior. So, how can we truly believe by changing our behavior and exercising a new habit? According to Mike Breen, belief consists of three steps. The first step is to have a **plan** to enact a new behavior as a result of repentance. Then make sure that someone keeps you **accountable** to your plan. The third step is to **act** on that plan.[[6]](#footnote-6) Seen in this way, for Andrew and Peter, James and John, “repent and believe” was no longer an off-putting accusation of condemnation. Instead, “repent and believe” became a challenging invitation to discipleship that was compelling enough for them to drop what they were doing in order to follow Jesus.

My journey toward belief has been my involvement with the Charlottesville Clergy Collective. This group of faith leaders -- of difference races, ethnicities, genders, and faith traditions -- meet once a month to have conversations on race and justice. In our conversations, we non-black members are moving into a posture of *repentance*, in which we have observed, reflected and come to acknowledge our privilege and complicity in the racist structures in our city. Then came the opportunity to put our *beliefs* into action. This past summer, the collective was thrust into planning a response to the KKK coming to town on July 8 and a white supremacist gathering on August 12. We held each other accountable to those plans, and we acted on it.

A good friend of mine is a pastor who led his church to be on the forefront of the faith community’s response in July and August. As a minister, he simply could not believe in a God of love and justice without *acting* on that belief. He heard the call of Jesus to follow Him in the arena of social justice. Like Simon Peter and Andrew, and James and John, my friend dropped everything to follow Christ.

Can you imagine the reaction of Zebedee, the father of James and John, when his two sons dropped everything to follow Jesus? If I were Zebedee, I might have said, “What in the world are you two doing? I *need* you in the family business. If you follow this Jesus guy, you will financially ruin me and our family! I am your father. You are supposed to take care of me in my old age. And yet, you abandon me! Where is your respect toward your elders? Why do you have to make things more uncomfortable and complicated for me and your mother? If you do this, I will disown you!

My pastor friend serves a wonderful church, but there were members who were very uncomfortable about his vocal visibility and his public activism. Some members were concerned for the safety of the church building and its members. Some demanded that he stop preaching “political sermons.” Some threatened to leave the church if he continued his ways. These responses made it very difficult for my friend to pastor. But he could only follow his conscience and the call of his Lord. He continues to face criticism and rejection from some members of his church. Is it painful for him? Yes. But he is more committed to Christ and to God’s Kingdom than to his job security. And there’s also another side of this story. His belief and commitment to racial justice also inspired many in his church. Through the courageous action of his church on this summer, that church is now seen as a beacon of inclusive love in Charlottesville. That church has seen an influx of millennial singles and couples because they were inspired by the church’s action and they want to join in that work.

Growing up in church, I mostly understood evangelism as telling and convincing unbelievers to repent or turn away from their wrong beliefs and behaviors, and believe in the right doctrines. Now, I can’t help but wonder if evangelism is primarily a call for *Christians* and the church to *repent* of our own hurtful beliefs and harmful behavior, and put what we *believe* about the inclusive love of God into action. In the book of Jonah, the prophet proclaimed destruction upon the pagan city of Ninevah. But when God saw how the city turned from their evil ways, God *changed his mind* about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and *he did not do it*. God is also One who repents and believes!

We serve a God who repents and believes. And on this day, Christ invites us to do the same…so that we may follow in Christ’s footsteps as His disciples. So, let’s follow Christ and give unbelievers a reason to believe through the way we live our lives! Amen.

1. “Virginia Negroes Seized at Church,” New York Times, July 29. 1963. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Donald Baker, “Shame of a Nation, about Brown v. Board of Education” Washington Post, March 4, 2001, p. W08.  Online at http://www.racematters.org/shameofanation.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://hyperallergic.com/395627/robert-e-lee-confederate-monument-charlottesville/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://timeline.com/charlottesville-vinegar-hill-demolished-ba27b6ea69e1 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Mike Breen and Steve Cockram, *Building a Discipling Culture*, (3 Dimension Ministries, 2009), pp. 30-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mike Breen and Steve Cockram, *Building a Discipling Culture*, (3 Dimension Ministries, 2009), pp. 34-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)