

Fruit...Repentance

Matthew 3:1-12
December 4, 2016

First United Methodist Church, Lindstrom

(This is a manuscript prepared for sermon delivery and may not represent actual words spoken.)

“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”

So we are continuing with our Advent theme that Jesus is the gift not all were expecting...the gift not all were hoping for...but the gift we all need. The idea today is Jesus brought about great change. Jesus continues to bring about great change. Amen? Jesus brings change. But the change Jesus effects is a change in us. Because of Jesus, we change. Whoa! You mean I have to change? Yep! Well...wasn't expecting that. And I'll guarantee you, people in the first century were not expecting they were the ones who had to change. They were hoping for something else.

You have maybe heard of Mickey Cohen. Now I want to be gracious here. But Mickey Cohen was kind of...well, he was a gangster. So he did gangster stuff. He did much of his work in Los Angeles. He was at the height of his activity in the 1950's. Billy Graham conducted one of his evangelistic crusades in Los Angeles in the 1950's. It was a rather lengthy crusade. It was reported that Billy Graham and Mickey Cohen had a somewhat private meeting. They ate together.

Mickey Cohen expressed an interest in becoming a Christian. But he did not give up his less than law-abiding ways...nor did he want to. He was confronted by some Christian acquaintances. You can read about this in an interesting article in an issue of **Time** magazine from back then. It was reported that Cohen said there were Christian athletes...and Christian business men. Why couldn't he be a Christian gangster?

Well...you know. But there is a question in this for each of us. Can I encounter Jesus...can I accept God's gift to me...and just

continue on with life as if God's gift makes no difference in my life? Can I follow Jesus and not be a changed person? Do I really want to change?

John the Baptist came preparing the way for Jesus. He was the voice announcing that people were to prepare and make straight paths for Jesus. John baptized. The people he baptized were confessing their sins and repenting. Some Pharisees and Sadducees came to where John was baptizing. John saw them. Now the text does not say this, but I think it is safe to infer it. Those Pharisees and Sadducees did not go to John to be baptized. They would not have seen themselves as terrible sinners. They were investigating.

But John called them a brood of vipers. Then he asked them who warned them to flee from the coming wrath. It was a rhetorical question. He asked them who warned them to flee...because John knew they had no intention of repenting. In other words, he was asking them, "Why have you come here since you do not desire any change in your lives?" Then he told them that their lives needed to give evidence of a desire to change. That is what "fruits of repentance" means.

Here's the deal on this. The Pharisees and Sadducees were expecting a Messiah. They were wanting a Messiah. They were hoping for a Messiah. All of Israel was hoping. Their Scriptures—the Old Testament—promised this gift from God. But their wants and hopes ran along political and national lines. The Messiah they hoped for would bring change alright. He would change their political situation. The Messiah they hoped for would drive out Rome and establish Israel as a free state. A free Israel was the kingdom of God.

We read of this hope all through the New Testament—even after Jesus had risen from the dead. Remember the encounter Jesus had with those two on the road to Emmaus? They talked about Jesus and said, "...we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel." First chapter of Acts...just before Jesus ascended into heaven...the disciples asked, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

Well, Jesus did not change the political climate of the day. In fact, Israel was still not an independent nation until some nineteen hundred years later. No kingdom—no kingdom—in this world is changed and made over to be the kingdom of God. The change Jesus brought—and continues to bring—is a change in the hearts of people...a change in lives. That's not what folks hoped for...or even wanted. They hoped for and wanted to see change in other people...in their enemies.

And there we have it...maybe not what we were wanting or hoping for...but what we need.

See, here's the deal. So often people talk to Jesus. And what they want Jesus to do is change their circumstance. There is stuff going on in their lives, and they want Jesus to change that stuff...remove that stuff...heal that stuff...and make life better. I mean, don't you often pray that way? I sure do. We ask Jesus to change the world...change our country...make it a nicer, a better, a safer, even a holier place to live.

How often, when we pray, do we ask Jesus to change us...to make us over? That's the challenge I want to leave with us today. Pray that way. As we pray for situations and circumstances, pray for how we are and how we act in those situations and circumstances. "God, it is a mess. Things are not going well. There is evil. But, Jesus, work in me—work in me—and make me into a nicer and a more obedient person. Jesus, work in me and make me into a new person...so that I can be a witness for you in this world." Let's all pray that way.

Yes, Jesus did not come to those first century folks and change their circumstance...bad as it was. Rome still ruled. Jesus came to change them. Not what they hoped for, but what they needed.

Jesus still calls us to repentance. He came to change us. That is what we need.

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