Pastor's Pen: The Call of St John The Baptist

There are fewer things more soul-crushing, in my mind, than when someone gives up on me. It tells me that someone either has a low opinion of me and my capabilities or sees me as beyond redemption. Some might see that as freeing; you have no expectations of me so I can do as I want. But for most, even if they enjoy the temporary feeling, there is something heart-wrenching within our souls when we rush to the lowest possible expectation. It robs our dignity of us and condemns us.

I find that the call to being better (which is what a call to repentance is) is a sign that the one making the call sees better in us and wants to bring that better-in-us to the forefront. They do this not because our being lesser is annoying, but because it is disappointing. When one knows (even if we don't or don't want to) that we are capable of better, it says they have a higher estimation of who we are or what we can be.

For the people of Israel, so often wallowing in idolatry and sinfulness, God sent prophet after prophet to them with the same essential message:"you have fallen, you are capable of better, please let me bring you back." God never writes off His people. He loves them far too much to give up on them permanently. No matter how much Israel ignores His pleas or how much they suffer because they have pushed His hand away, He reaches out time and again. He calls them to repentance specifically because He knows what they can be and is willing to give them all the help they need to get there.

The call of the prophets is a call to something that is better. Is it a sign that God has not given up on us? Yes. Absolutely! But answering that call requires us to also admit we can be better. The hope God has for us can be stymied by the lack of hope we have in ourselves. We can grow comfortable in our sin because we have long succumbed to the idea that we can break free of it. The perceived benefits of slavery can keep us from throwing off the chains and shackles of which we always possess the key to take off. God does not call us to something we are incapable of.

This is at the heart of the call of St. John the Baptist. In the season of Advent, his call to repentance (the call of a prophet) is a sure sign not just that the promised Messiah is coming, but that this Messiah wants us with Him; He wants us to live freely in the family covenant bond He will extend to us. The call of John the Baptist is a call full of hope. It is that sure sign that God never gives up on us even if we have given up on ourselves. It is the hand of God reaching out to us, tearfully embracing us as the father does for his wayward son in the parable of the Prodigal Son. The call to repentance is the call of a father longing for children to be with him forever.

Repentance is a function of the theological virtue of hope. It is our response to God's loving call. It is the unlocking of the chains that bind us in sin. It is using grace to see ourselves with the same hopeful future with which God sees us. The world, the devil, will always tell us the call to repentance is the act of an angry and unfair God who does not want us to enjoy life.

A slave master hates it when the slaves want freedom. The world and the devil are quite happy to keep us enslaved to our passions, appetites, and sinfulness as they believe that is Man's natural state. God knows He created us to be His children. He did not create us to be slaves of the devil. Repentance is a good thing. Repentance is our response to the offer of freedom…true freedom. That God so forcefully makes clear through the ministry of the prophets.

We have an essential choice: the despair of slavery to sin which leads to isolation, frustration and eternal damnation or the freedom of hope which leads to right-relationship, a family bond based in selfless love, true fulfillment, and eternal life. Repentance is not a one and done type of thing. We gradually break free with God's grace, especially when it comes to habitual sinfulness.

This leads to how Christ instructed His Church to make readily available the grace to repent. God does not make us repent without His help. He inspires us to repentance and then gives us the grace to conquer our passions and appetites. He makes an oath with us (the word 'sacrament' comes from the Latin for the oath that the Roman Emperor would make with his soldiers) through the sacrament of Reconciliation: I will set you free and give the grace to remain free but you have to pledge to use that grace to remain free.

It is one of those sacraments (along with Eucharist to which it is intimately tied) that can be received over and over again. The reason for this is because breaking the chains of sin is difficult. Breaking from habitual sin is very difficult. It takes time. It takes a continual effort of repeatedly using God's grace to shatter those chains to fine dust. This is why I offer confessions almost daily. I recognize the role of confession in my own life (yes, I go to confession). I have witnessed over the course of time how so many habitual sins I have engaged in have dissipated over time. The call to repentance is one that I try to hear and act on daily. Why give up on myself if God has not given up on me? Why give up on yourself when God has not given up on you?

Think about that. Pray about that as you hear those words of St John the Baptist in the gospels this week and next week: Prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight the path! God will give you all you need to do so. Will it hurt sometimes? Yes. Will God give you the strength you don't think you have? Yes. God will be your strength. The call to repentance is not limited to when the priest is wearing purple during Mass, but is a call that resonates through the whole year. Rejoice! Every call is a sign that God wants better for you and knows you are capable of being better with His help.