

Repent and bear fruit (Matthew 3:1-12)

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John the Baptist is alive and well in San Francisco. He appears at the corner of Powell and Market Streets, where long lines of tourists wait to catch a cable car ride over scenic Nob Hill and Russian Hill on the way to Fisherman's Wharf. He enjoys a captive audience. Some days, you can choose from among several candidates. Whether toting a sign or a Bible, their message is the same. Repent! Or else!

These days, I don't find the message inappropriate. I may be put off by their appearance, but from the first John the Baptist in the gospels to the ones I encounter today, we need to pay attention to their message: Repent!

I was told recently that my progressive theology does not take the call for repentance seriously enough. I was challenged to address the issue of how my denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), could change its ordination standards to permit LGBTQ candidates to be ministers without requiring them to repent of their sins. The accusation bordered on a vicious attack.

The irony is that I do take repentance seriously. A colleague once wrote that "everyone reads the Bible selectively, no exceptions. The question, for everyone, is, 'what do I select to follow, to value, to credit and why?'" In my recent encounter, my accuser's primary focus was human sexuality, homosexuality in particular.

In Paul's letter to the church in Galatia, the issue is circumcision. On what basis can any believer set aside God's law, God's requirements? For Paul, any teaching—the scriptures, the law of God—which is contradictory to the gospel of Jesus Christ is to

be rejected. As Paul writes, “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything....but faith working through love.” John the Baptist preaches repentance, indicting those in the flesh as “you brood of vipers” and challenging them to “bear fruit worthy of repentance.” Paul specifies the fruit of the Spirit as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And he notes that there is no law against such things.

In these times of racism and gun violence and economic inequality, we can use a heavy dose of repentance. The world would be a better place if more of us confessed, apologized, sought forgiveness. If we can get past the strangeness of John, his message to re-orient ourselves—to change our attitudes and perceptions, especially with regards to race and class, to sexual orientation, to economics and religion—needs to be heard. Whatever parts of the Bible we select to read and value, I am grateful for John the Baptist’s indictment that the test of true repentance is the fruit we bear.