

## **Repentance: The Purification of the Mind**

**Readings:** Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-6; Philippians 1:3-11

By the Rev. Karen Faye Siegfriedt

“The purpose of the Christian faith is clear and simple. It is not an evacuation plan to heaven but a transformation plan for earth; a transformation plan built on the strategy of helping people become loving human beings who build loving societies, following the loving example of Jesus.” (Brian McLauren) Well, we’ve had about 2000 years to create a loving society. How do you think we’re doing? From my perspective, things seem to be a bit shaky! Why do you think that is? What I would like to talk about today is repentance, a change in the way we think, the purification of the human mind.

I once heard the Bible summarized as follows: God creates. God calls the people into obedience. The people respond positively, at least for a while. Then the people fall away. Unfortunately, they suffer the consequences of being alienated from God. Once again, God calls the people to obedience. The people respond positively, at least for a while. Then the people fall away. Unfortunately, they suffer the consequences of being alienated from God. And so the cycle continues on. Today, it seems as if people of faith, Christians in particular, are in the stage of falling away, becoming more alienated from God and God’s dream for humanity. As Malachi the prophet declared some 2500 years ago, the consequences will be severe unless we are purified just as silver must be purified before it is of any use. And for those who know about the purification of precious metals, it can be a rather laborious process.

This purification process is long overdue for many, including our elected officials and institutions whose inner-spirituality is fallen. Their inner-spirituality is fallen because their policies are based on greed and power, thereby abusing the authority they have been given. We are now living in a nation where power is hoarded, money is loved, nationalism is honored and lies are becoming the norm. It feels as if our democracy is dying in darkness, leaving the lost, the lonely, and the left-behind (for whom Jesus advocated and healed) at great risk.

Have you ever wondered why the world continues to experience so much pain and suffering, conflict, wars, and woundedness after 2000 years of Christianity? I mean, if Christ is “the way, the truth, and the life,” shouldn’t things have turned out better by now? What seems to be the stumbling block? In my opinion, the Church has focused its teachings mainly on actions rather than the disciplining the mind. We have been taught what to do and what not to do. We have the shall and shall nots of the 10 commandments. And yet we struggle with an inner conflict between our commitment to our baptismal vows ‘to do good’ and our actual behavior.

I think what is missing regarding Christian discipleship, is the training of the mind. In our heart, we already know what is right but our thoughts seem to have a mind of their own. The mind can sometimes be a more powerful force than the will. Afterall, thoughts matter! Every emotion, every action, begins with a thought. Good thoughts perpetuate good emotions and actions while bad thoughts can bring about bad emotions and actions. The words you mutter to yourself and the thoughts that you dwell on have the power to encourage or discourage, to motivate or deflate, to generate joy or generate sadness. Little by little, the conversations that you hold in the privacy of your mind are determining your destiny. Each thought can move you toward or away from your God-given potential.

It is into this discussion on thoughts and the disciplining of the mind that today's gospel introduces John the Baptist. John, the son of Zechariah, "went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." (Luke 3) The Greek word used for repentance is metanoia. Metanoia is understood as a change of mind or a change of perspective. It involves a sincere turning away from past wrongdoings and a commitment to a new way of life aligned with God's will. This act of repentance goes beyond remorse, regret or feeling bad about one's bad choices. In its fullest sense, it is a term for a complete change of orientation where we actually "put on the mind of Christ" rather than simply allow the thoughts of our wounded ego to call the shots. It is nothing less than a 'new mind'!

Repentance was a central theme in the preaching of John the Baptist, Jesus, and the apostles. It is a subject that is often emphasized during the seasons of Advent and Lent. This radical reorientation of one's life towards God, all begins with our thoughts. So let's take a closer look at how our mind works.

The average person thinks about 50,000 thoughts per day. "85-90% of what we think is either pointless or repetitive or both." (Eckart Tolle) This includes worrying about the future, projecting possible outcomes of a future that is uncertain. It also includes ruminating about past hurts and disappointments. We can never change the past and so thoughts about the past tend to be pointless, repetitive and possibly painful. Worrying or ruminating is the refusal or inability to remain in the present moment.

Most of us are afflicted with this kind of compulsive, continuous thinking about the past and the future, a never-ending stream of involuntary thoughts that deplete our joy. Many people are oblivious to their habitual way of thinking which unfortunately leads them to do things that go against their own principles. This thoughtless way of thinking has caused great division in our country. This ought not to be so. Instead, our mind is to be used as a tool for problem solving, learning new things, engaging in activities, and delighting in God's creation. We mustn't allow the mind to be hijacked by useless thoughts, fearful thoughts, and old emotions that deplete our joy and deprive us of abundant life. For our own spiritual healing, and for the health of this nation, it is time to take charge of our mind rather than allowing our mind to take charge of us.

So how do we begin the process of disciplining our mind so that the mind of Christ can take precedence over our wounded ego which perpetuates wounded thoughts? How do we take back control of our thoughts so that they work for us? Here are three insights that I find helpful in my own spiritual journey of repentance.

**1. Strengthen your consent muscle:** If you want to develop upper body strength, then you need to commit to a practice like weight training, gradually increasing the weights, and maybe doing some push-ups and pullups. Likewise, if you want to strengthen your mental consent muscle so that you can decide which thoughts to focus on and which thoughts to discard, then you need to train your mind and commit yourself to a practice of mindfulness. This is how it works. Once you notice a distracting thought, you need to ask: "Do I want this thought? Is it helpful to my well-being? How does this thought or cycle of thoughts make me feel?"

Next, you need to make a decision to let go of the thought/s. The most difficult part in this practice is to catch the thought in its infancy before it turns into a distraction or a full-blown emotion. Like strengthening our muscles by lifting weights at the gym, we can strengthen our consent muscle through the practice of mindfulness. When I am plagued with a thought that is negative or I'm rehashing a

painful experience about the past, I try to nip it in the bud and say to myself: “painful, persistence, past, pointless ...put it away.” On the other hand, if I am worrying about a future event that hasn’t even happen, I expose the thought with the words “future, fantasy, foolish...forget it!” Sometimes, I have to do this repeatedly before the thought disappears.

**2. Guard your heart:** To guard one’s heart means to avoid exposure or attention to negative environments. For instance, if a person is beginning the path to sobriety, the last place he needs to go to meet his friends is at a bar. If the fear mongering news is making you angry or anxious or despairing, you need to shut it off as a way of guarding your heart. Since the election in November, several of my friends are taking a break from the toxic, partisan fighting, focused on by the media. If you do not have agency in making a change, then it makes no sense for you to rehash and rehearse all of the evils that could befall our country.

Instead, when it is possible, act decisively in promoting justice according to your gifts. For myself, instead of rehearsing all the negativity in the political sphere, I take action by writing to my elected officials. I send money to those organizations and leaders that promote civil rights and fight for justice. I preach prophetically, speaking truth to a culture of lies. And since we are up against forces that use bigotry and lies to entrench their power, I know it will take time, patience, and tenacity to change course. So do not let your thoughts rob you of your joy.

**3. The Practice of Prayer:** There are three types of prayer that can help us diminish negative thinking. 1) Mindfulness Meditation which involves staying focused on the present moment. Mindfulness meditation includes practices like contemplative prayer, yoga, counting the laps as you swim, or focusing on your breathing as you walk on the beach. Mindfulness is needed to ‘nip those thoughts in the bud’ that are not useful to your well-being. 2) The Prayer of Gratitude: If “thank you” is the only prayer you know, then that is sufficient. Practicing gratitude can transform negative thinking into appreciation for all the blessings we do have. 3) Arrow Prayers: Arrow prayers are short prayers to utter when it becomes difficult to move beyond those thoughts and emotions that we don’t want. Some arrow prayers that I frequently use are: “God come to my assistance.” “Grace, grace, grace.” or the Jesus Prayer.

We live in a society that is fearful, cynical, and negative. We have a tendency to nurse old wounds. Our minds are being goaded by a news media that highlights all that is wrong. Our biology is wired to focus on danger, threats, and negative input as a survival tool. If we are ever to attain peace, our world needs more people who are conscious, mindful, and careful thinkers. Remember: “Your mind is a garden, your thoughts are the seeds. You can grow flowers or you can grow weeds.”