

Fishers of People, Catchers in the Rye

By: Penny Holste

January 8, 2012. To repent is to acknowledge that there is pain in the world, and admit that we are partly responsible for it. Pastor Penny preaches on the story of Jesus' baptism, and how Jesus' message to the world was not gentle. It was about both promise and repentance. But it's when we repent that we can really hear the grace of God in our baptism.

*** Transcript ***

We begin in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the movie "My Week with Marilyn" we get a glimpse of the life of Marilyn Monroe, the glamorous movie star from the 1950s who shot into fame. She was a nobody, Norma Jean. And then she was found. Her life -- even though she was known throughout the world and people followed her around everywhere -- her life was not very joyful. She was married and divorced three times, and at the age of 36 she took her own life apparently, taking sleeping pills. I am sure that most people look to her early childhood for some explanation of the sadness in her adult life, because her early childhood was not very happy. She never knew her father, and her mother had a mental illness and had to be institutionalized. So Norma Jean, or Marilyn Monroe, grew up in an orphanage and in many different foster homes. And there's a very touching point in the movie, where she says she thinks that every little girl should be able to hear her mother say that she loves her. And you can only imagine that she never heard that, or heard it very seldom.

What a contrast between her childhood and her life and her relationship with her parents, and the voice that Jesus heard in his baptism, the voice of his Heavenly Father saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased." You know, with words of love and support from a parent like that, what couldn't a child accomplish? Now Jesus knew that he had his Father's love and support. But his Father did not coddle him by any means. Along with this love and support was a plan, were expectations. And the way that the Father lent his support -- just as we were talking about up here in our baptisms -- the way the Father lent his support to the Son was through the Holy Spirit. And the description of the Holy Spirit in our text this morning is not a gentle force. It says that the Spirit "tore open" the heavens to come down in the form of a dove. This Spirit drove Jesus. It didn't compel Jesus or lead Jesus. It *drove* Jesus, into the wilderness where there were wild beasts. And there he was tempted for 40 days and 40 nights, or in other words a long time, by Satan. Now, the Father was there in the form of angels who ministered to him. But that time must have been like boot camp for Jesus. You know, his natural inclination to love was being refined and strengthened and focused. And when he was done, he began his ministry and began calling his disciples.

And the Holy Spirit was not gentle with Jesus' disciples either. It was more like an eagle than a dove. Jesus walked up to Peter and Andrew, and it was as though they couldn't say no. It was as though the Holy Spirit wouldn't allow them to say no, because they dropped everything and followed Jesus. Or Jesus went up to James and John, and they left their father, they left the hired help. No handshakes to Dad or kiss Mom on the cheek or pack the bag. They were gone. And Jesus was not gentle with them either. When they came, he said, "I will make you fishers of people." He didn't say: I will teach you how to do this, I will encourage you, I will lead you. He said, "I will make you fishers of people."

I always think that expression "fishers of men" or "fishers of people" is kind of interesting. And I

always think of the book *The Catcher in the Rye*, and this little teenager Holden Caulfield is trying to find himself, trying to become an adult. He runs away from home. He tries to get street savvy. But the vision that he has for what he really wants to be in life is a catcher in the rye. He has this picture of a big field of rye, and all these children playing. But at the edge of the field there is a cliff. And he wants to be the catcher, the one to stand there and protect those kids and keep them from falling off the cliff. And maybe that's a good way to think of what Jesus is making his disciples into, and making us into: people who catch people and keep them from falling off the cliffs, spiritually and emotionally and physically.

Well, Jesus' message to the world was not gentle either. He had two parts to it. The one was a promise. It was: believe in the good news. But the first part was a hard part: repent. That was the twofold message: repent and believe in the good news. And they go together. You really can't believe without repenting. Now "repenting" is a word we only use here and in these walls, and it goes with confession and sin. And we might feel that that word doesn't have much place in our ordinary lives. But repent is really quite a practical thing. It is simply acknowledging that there is pain in the world, and admitting that we are partly responsible for it. Acknowledging the pain and admitting that we are responsible. That's what it means to repent. And it's not easy to do even the first part, to acknowledge the pain in the world.

In his latest book, the travel writer Rick Steves says that for most of his adult life he willingly chose to ignore the pain that he knew was going on in some places. Central America was one he mentioned. He knew there was a civil war in the 80s, and that the left was fighting the right, and that our government was supporting the right. But he didn't know where the truth lay. He didn't understand it. It was too complicated, took too much energy. He just said I didn't need that. And then he went there. He went actually to El Salvador, and that changed everything. When he got there he realized that he did have the power to begin to discern the truth, by talking to people and observing. And not only *could* he, but he believed he *should* start to understand what was happening there. It was important to him. And it became the beginning of his whole new way of looking at travel, which is *Travel as a Political Act*. That's his most recent book.

And I think it's really easy for us living in this country to be like Rick Steves, and just sort of isolate and insulate ourselves from the pain in other parts of the world. We really don't want to think about it. But it's not just the other parts of the world that we like to ignore. It's pretty easy to turn a blind eye or a deaf ear to when people are being mistreated at work or in school. It's just hard to know what to do. It's just easier not to do anything. And sometimes it's true that we even try to ignore the pain that is right within our own families.

The author of *Almost Christian*, a book that does a study of teenagers and faith, has a lot of critical remarks to make towards adults in mainline Christian churches. She says that we even make God into the kind of being who is removed from the pain of the world. She sees that so many churches teach about a God who is removed, who's distant, who's glad to see when things go well, wants us to be happy, wants us to feel good about ourselves, but doesn't really get involved. And there's no sin or responsibility involved with this God. And she says if you teach that kind of God, don't be surprised if your teenagers don't feel that that God is a part of their lives.

So it's easy for us to fail to see the hurt in the world. But some people live in a world of hurt and they can't ignore it. Their temptation is to just say, "Well that's not my fault. I'm not responsible. You know, it's a dog-eat-dog world. Do it to them before they do it to you. It's not my fault that things are happening." So that idea of repenting, seeing the hurt, taking responsibility, is really hard for us. And

yet it is so essential.

And it was true, I think, at any stage in our lives that it's a hard thing to do. But the first time that we have an opportunity to do that publicly, to repent publicly, is in our baptisms. And it is so amazing, if we understand what's happening there, to see the blessing in it. I remember when our daughter was baptized. She screamed the entire time. And someone kindly afterwards said, "Well, it was just the devil coming out of her." I thought, it's not exactly comforting. On the other hand, it maybe is a good explanation. Maybe when there's a baptism, there's like a little fight going on, and God is finally booting the devil out and getting the upper hand. It's when we repent that we can really hear the grace of God in baptism.

Because God is saying I know that there's a world of hurt, and I know you're responsible for it in your selfishness, you just are. But I am about to drastically change your status. The stink of your sin is going to be removed. The stain of your sin is going to be replaced. I am going to give you a new identity, that of a perfect person. I will see you the way I see my Son, pure and innocent. And so what happens in baptism for each of us is that God is saying the very same words to us that God said at Jesus' baptism: "You are my son, you are my daughter, the beloved. With you I am well pleased. For you I have a plan. I will make you to be fishers of people, to be catchers in the rye."

With words of love and encouragement like that from our Heavenly Father, how could we not accomplish great things? Thanks be to God.

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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