

“The City of God “by Anna Gilcher

January 27, 2008



Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near! (NRSV)

Reshape your lives, for God's new order of the Spirit is confronting you! (Clarence Jordan, Cotton Patch Gospel)

Change your life. God's kingdom is here. (Eugene Peterson, The Message)

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand! (New American Standard)

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near! (NIV)

Change your ways because Heaven's imperial rule is closing in. (Jesus Seminar scholars-quoted by Pat Conover in 1/27/2002 sermon)

The City of God is here.

It is here... here... here...

In his letter to the Church at Corinth, Paul writes: "Now I

appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose."

(Repent! for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!)

But what does this mean, for there to be no divisions among us, for all of us to be in agreement, for us to be united?

Does it mean saying yes and keeping quiet when something happens that we don't agree with? ...when our bodies tremble with fear each time we walk into the building? when our hearts ache?

Does it mean never moving forward on something we believe to be important but which not everyone agrees with?

These are hard questions. I don't think anyone in this community would think that we are being called to just put on a stiff upper lip and pretend. Nor that we should refuse ever to make decisions for fear of offending someone.

Yet, what are we being called to? What does it mean to repent? And what does it mean to be in agreement, united, with no divisions among us?

"The gates of our hearts are bolted shut," we said in our confession. "We are frightened of what might come in. We are concerned about what might get out."

We are living so far from the City of God...

Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation* (Cambridge: Cowley, 2000) writes that "forgiveness is a starting place, not a stopping place. It is God's gift to those who wish to begin again, but where we go with it is up to us.... Most of us prefer remorse to repentance. We would rather feel badly about the damage we have done than get estimates on the cost of repair. We would rather learn to

live with guilt than face the hard work of new life.

"While penance has all but disappeared from our vocabulary, it was once the church's best tool for getting over that hump," she writes. "Once a person had confessed her sins and received assurance of pardon, she voluntarily took on specific acts of penance, which were baby steps in the direction of new life. If she had stolen vegetables from a neighbor's garden, then she might volunteer to weed the garden every other day for a month. If she had slandered someone, then she might revisit all the households where she had done that and set the record straight.

"Penance was not punishment. Penance was a way back into relationship." (90-91)

Repent! Change your ways! Reshape your lives!

She writes, "**repentance** is not complete until confession and pardon lead to penance that allows community to be restored.. Salvation is not offered to us as some kind of metaphysical prize. It is offered to us **in our bodies** as God's manifest power to change human lives." (93)

Salvation is offered to us in our bodies as God's manifest power to change human lives.

It is offered right here in this body of Christ, between us, among us, and inside our own bodies.

Confession... pardon... penance... restoration of community...

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What guilt have you-have I-chosen to live with, rather than do the hard work of repentance and restoration of community?

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And now I think of James and John and Zebedee, in the boat,

mending their nets. So much of the work of fishing is tending to the nets, mending them, noticing when the threads are growing strained, when the knots are giving way, and strengthening them, tying them once more. Setting them right. The Greek word that is used here is "katartizo,"-to put in order, to restore, to join together. It's a word that's used for setting a broken bone.

My friends, it is the same word that Paul uses when he appeals to his brothers and sisters in the church in Corinth to be united, to be in agreement. Katartizo. He asks them to be united in the sense of being mended, a broken bone being put right, joined together once more.

And now I feel a sense of hope as I listen to Paul's words. For I imagine a community that is broken and mended, full of broken bones which have been joined back together with love and care-through true repentance-confession, pardon, penance, restoration of community. A community which will continue to find bones that are broken and which will take the time to set them right.

This community has room to honor both the ache of the fearful body and the longing to stretch one's limbs and move into a joyful run forward.

I have heard that children's sense of trust is built not by that trust never being broken-an impossibility-but by the consistency of repair work that is done. Inbal Kashtan, one of my favorite practitioners and teachers of nonviolent communication, calls it the broom and dustpan approach to parenting. When something gets broken, you get out the broom and the dustpan and do the clean-up together.

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How do we go about cleaning up in this community (or, if you're not usually a part of this community, in your own community)? how do you do this work in your life?

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I do feel a sense of hope, but I'm also afraid. How much are we sweeping into the dustpan and how much is left on the floor, or swept under the rug? Do we need to get out the vacuum cleaner to get those little, almost invisible pieces of glass off the floor? What would that look like?

To go back to the broken bones image, some bones probably won't get set right, and may grow back together in awkward ways. Others we may miss altogether.

And to remain with the "katartizo" theme while using yet another image, perhaps we'll find ourselves still sitting in the boat, like Zebedee, mending our nets when Jesus has come calling for us to go fishing again, and this time to fish for something much greater, much more important than anything we'd ever imagined before. A job for which we don't even need those nets.

And it's so much greater and so much more important that we don't even recognize it as having happened—we just bend our heads and keep mending those nets while our two sons have jumped out of the boat and have answered the call... we're just sitting there, head bent over our work and wondering why they don't help us out a little more...

Here, then, is where I'm so grateful for God's overwhelming love and consistent call. For I don't believe that we can do all this mending ourselves. We can't clean it all up. Nor will we have the ears to hear the call at all times.

We cannot do this ourselves.

As one of my favorite hymns puts it, *I am weak and I need thy strength and power to help me over my weakest hour; help me*

through the darkness thy face to see, Lead me, o Lord lead me.

Thanks be to God that God is willing to lead us... and love us... and persistently call us back into relationship-with God and with each other.

Jesus will be back to invite us to put down our nets and follow him. He'll lead us and guide us along the way.

The kingdom of heaven is, indeed, at hand.

Fling open the gates: the City of God is here.