

**“Stepping onto the Porch of Religion”**  
**Joel 2:12-14; Acts 2:38-39**  
**Second Sunday after the Epiphany**  
**January 18, 2009**

**Note:** *There are those who say that you can be a United Methodist and believe anything. That is not true. As United Methodist Christians, we do have a definite set of beliefs. It is important for us to know what we believe. Teaching doctrine on Sunday morning, however, is not the best way to hold the interest of a congregation—or a preacher. What follows, then, is my attempt to make United Methodist doctrine interesting. Whether or not it works is up to you.*

*“Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart... Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful.” Joel 2:12,13*

*“There are only two kinds of men: the righteous who believe themselves sinners; the rest, sinners, who believe themselves righteous.” Blaise Pascal*

Saying that I was nervous would probably be an understatement. Stepping onto “the porch of religion,” which had been referred to as “repentance,” sounded quite intimidating to say the least. Some of you may remember that I had been quietly sitting in my La-Z-Boy one day watching a football game when I suddenly woke up and found myself in a place that I never expected to be. I was standing in a huge beautiful yard that surrounded what had to be at least a 100-year-old timber frame house. It was stunning and seemed to be inviting me to come in. But while I was still wondering where I was, how I got there, and even whether or not all of this was just a dream, a middle-aged man came walking out the front door to greet me. He wore blue jeans, work boots, and an old black Jimmy Buffet concert tee shirt. Thick dark hair and a beard speckled with gray framed his face. As he stuck out his hand to greet me, I noticed that it was toughened by years of hard work, and that he had strange scars on his wrists. And while this was the first time I had ever laid eyes on him, I felt totally at ease in his presence.

We sat down on the grass, under the shade of one of the big trees, and began a conversation that lasted for hours, hours that seemed to fly by. It was then that he told me that I had awakened in the yard of religion. “At least that is what your buddy John Wesley, the founder of your Methodist church, would have called it,” he told me. He went on to help me remember all of those events that had occurred throughout my life—

both the memorable and not so memorable—that had gradually and ever so gently nudged me down the path that led to this very beautiful place. Somehow knowing that I grew up Methodist, he once again used the words of Wesley and called those gentle nudges “prevenient grace,” the working of God in peoples’ lives before they are even aware that God is working in their lives. Slowly but surely I began to get a handle on what he was saying. While my arrival in the yard of religion came as a complete and total surprise, I found it a truly wonderful and most marvelous place to be. I loved sitting with him on the grass. But then my friend told me that the yard wasn’t the final destination of my journey. I was invited to travel up the walk and enter that beautiful homestead, which Wesley called “the house of religion.” That is where I was told I would find myself the closest I could ever be to God. In order to get into the house, however, I had to first step onto the porch. And as you already heard me say, that porch was all about what the founder of Methodism called repentance.

“I don’t know if I really want to do this,” I told my friend as he lifted me to my feet. “I don’t know if I *can* do this. Where would I even start repenting?” My friend smiled, his eyes filled with a sense of compassion and understanding I had rarely seen. “Let’s see, should we start with the time you took that chocolate chip cookie even after your mother told you to wait until after dinner or the time that you and your wife broke your sons’ hearts by getting divorced? Hmmm. Sins are sins, you know. There aren’t different levels or degrees. And you have sinned enough to write a book—several as a matter of fact. But if we’d start going through each page, we’d be here for next couple of weeks—maybe more! Martin Luther thought just like you, you know. Bless his heart, he got up to this porch and almost drove the both of us crazy by trying to confess every misstep he had ever made. It took a long time to convince him that his entire understanding of sin and repentance was more than a bit wrongheaded. In order for him to be able to step up on the porch, he had to get back to the original understanding of sin and repentance.”

“What do you mean by the original understanding?” I asked. “It is simple,” he replied. “For way too long people like Martin and you have thought of sin simply as

disobedience, as nothing more than bad behavior. They see that big long list of ‘do’s and don’ts’ in the Bible and think of sin as simply the breaking of those the rules, of doing the wrong thing. The truth is that the failure to obey the rules is just the symptom of the problem, not the problem itself. That is found deep within people. Tell me if you can, what do you think the problem might be? How did the writers of the Bible choose to describe it? If I remember correctly, it was Miss Gideon who first told you the story. You should know it.” Now we had talked about Miss Gideon earlier. She was the preschool Sunday School teacher at the church in which I grew up. All I have are vague memories of her. How in the world was I supposed to remember anything she said, I thought? “Okay, then,” he said, “you heard the same story from your dad, your grandma, and even Miss Petre, your youth director.” He was reading my thoughts again. It really made me uncomfortable when he did that. So I just stood there with my hands in my pockets, trying not to say or think a thing. Yeah, right.

He smiled. “C’mon, this is easy. Adam, Eve, the garden... you know the story.” Well of course I knew that story, but I didn’t have the slightest idea where he was going with it. After all, they did what they were told not to do, right? If that is not disobedience, then what is? “Let’s see,” he said. “Beautiful garden... big tree in the middle of the garden... warned to not eat the fruit of the tree. What did they do?” I had this one. “They ate the fruit,” I said rather proudly. “Why?” In the best Rev. Leroy imitation I could muster, I said, “The devil made ‘em do it!” “Wrong.” Wrong? “What are you talking about?” I asked. “That’s what the story says, right? The serpent in the tree tempted them, and they took the bait!” He looked at me. “That’s true, but first they made the decision to go their own way. That was the sin. Eating the fruit was just the symptom of the sin. Rather than walking down the path they were created to take, they chose to start walking down a path of their own. And in walking down their own path, in deciding to go their own way, they got farther and farther away from the one who loved them.”

I nodded my head. What he said sort of made sense—sort of. I was still confused, however. So he continued. “There are a lot of ways to talk about walking down one’s own path. Some folks like to refer to sin as unfaithfulness. Rather than loving and

trusting God, people love and trust someone or something else. The scriptures, of course, calls the loving or trusting of anything or anyone but God idolatry. Other folks like to talk about sin as estrangement, that the farther someone gets down that path the farther one gets from the only place one truly belongs. Those who are estranged, then, live in exile—somewhere east of Eden as the Bible writers put it. I think you Nebraskans call that ‘Council Bluffs.’ There are even some folks who won’t talk about sin at all, and instead blame the problem that everyone experiences in one form or another on heredity, upbringing, environment, and a host of other factors. They’ll not only find excuses that seem to justify individual sin, but community and national sin as well. But whatever one chooses to call it, sin is nothing more than people choosing to walk down their own path, of trusting in someone or something other than God, and of moving farther and farther down the road from the only one who truly loves them. All those rules people break, even those 10 big ones, are only the symptoms of a much larger and much deeper problem; a problem that is not found on the outside of men and women, but on the inside.”

“Okay,” I said, “so sin is choosing to go our own way. It is our decision to be independent from God and the course that God intended for us to walk. All the wrong things we do on the outside are simply the manifestation of a very big problem on the inside. Am I getting that right?” He looked at me and smiled. “Very good. It looks like you’re getting the hang of it.” I paused for a moment, still weary about stepping up on the porch. “So then, what’s this repentance thing all about? I was always told that it involved feeling sorry for the bad things I did and then confessing them. Isn’t that a part of what repentance is all about?”

My friend sat down on the first step and rested his arms on his knees. He was silent for a moment, looking as if he was searching for the perfect answer, and then he said very deliberately, “Oh yeah, that is a part of it. But I want you to think for a moment. Did saying you were sorry for making fun of your sister for wearing that ‘27’ shirt so much when she was a kid keep you from doing it over and over again?” I smiled. “No, but she was just so easy to mess with!” He laughed, “Yeah, I know, but that’s beside the point. Did telling your folks that you were sorry for not telling them where you had been

on that one night after you got off work keep you from not telling them where you had been on other nights?” I tried to get out at least an “Uhhhhh,” but he just kept talking. “Did telling Carol you were sorry for disappointing her the first time keep you from disappointing her the second time—and for the very same thing?” I hung my head and kicked at the ground a few times. “No,” I finally admitted. “So then, repentance must not be simply feeling sorry for what you did or did not do and then confessing it, right? Repentance must be something else. It is not just about changing what you’re doing on the outside, although that is often a very good thing to do. It’s about letting God help you change what you’re doing on the inside. Just like Zacchaeus did after our lunch together, it’s about doing things, it’s about living life, in a brand new way.”

“Think for a moment. What did you just say was the definition of sin?” It took me a while to gather my thoughts, but I finally said, “Choosing to go our own way. Sin is walking away from God.” “Excellent. Then what is repentance?” “Well, I guess it must be turning around and walking toward God, back on the path God originally wanted us to walk.” “An intelligent boy. A remarkable boy. That good Benson education wasn’t wasted on you, was it? Now when you start to study the Bible, you will find that both the Old and the New Testaments use words for repentance that have very similar definitions. The Hebrew word is *‘shubh’* which means ‘to go in the opposite direction’ or ‘to turn back.’ The Greek word is *‘metanoia,’* which means ‘to reverse one’s course.’ Whenever the biblical writers talked about repentance, they were talking about people turning around and permitting God to help them walk in a new direction. The old path upon which people chose to take took them farther and farther away from the source of life. That’s what Paul meant when he wrote: ‘The wages of sin is death.’ But turning around and walking down that new path leads people back to the source of life. Stepping up onto the porch of religion, which your buddy John Wesley also said was repentance, gets you one step closer to the house of religion, which is the heart of God. By the way, do you know what Wesley called that moment of turning around?” I was clueless. “Are you ready? You’re going to love this. He called it... faith.”

I'll have to confess that after hearing all that I was beginning to feel much better about stepping onto that porch. It didn't seem as threatening as it once did. But suddenly, an image flashed into my mind. Instantly a shudder of fear went up and down my spine. It took me a moment to gather myself, and once I did I looked at my friend and very thoughtfully said, "When my dad used to take my brother and me to Husker games, there was a big black sign with white gothic letters out in a cornfield somewhere near Waverly and along old Highway 6 that proclaimed, 'Repent, the end is near!' I always hated that sign. It scared me so much that I would always close my eyes when I knew we were getting close, just so I wouldn't see it. What was that all about?" He smiled, "Yeah, I remember it. That was unfortunate. Frank had good intentions, but sent the wrong message. Just remember that true repentance is never initiated by fear. My old fishing buddy John put it best when he wrote, 'Perfect love cast out fear.' Besides, the Bible never does say anything like that. What the Bible says is, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.'" The kingdom of heaven is not the end, but a brand new beginning, and it's all about that perfect love. And true repentance, you see, is always initiated by that perfect love."

Not an end, but a beginning. True repentance is always initiated by love. Those ideas rolled around inside of me. I really liked what he had said. But then my thoughts were interrupted. "It's time to step onto the porch. Are you ready?" he asked softly. I looked at it once again. Three stair steps led to a large covered porch that stretched across the front of the house and around to the fireplace chimney on both sides. Honeysuckle vines grew freely on one side and the air was filled with their pleasing aroma. Large rocking chairs rested upon heavy pine planks that were held firmly in place by old square-cut nails. As I already mentioned, that old porch didn't look nearly as foreboding as it once did. As a matter of fact, it looked quite inviting now, especially with my friend standing at the top of the steps waiting for me and extending his hand to help me. When I looked up at him I knew that I wanted to walk toward him join him on that porch more than I have ever wanted anything in my entire life. So that is exactly what I did. I reached out, took his hand, and stepped onto the porch of religion, which Brother John called repentance.

I was greeted by a big smile and a slap on the back. “Alright! You made it! Now you can continue your journey.” He pointed to the door that now stood directly in front of me. It was made of quarter-sawn white oak and had heavy black iron strap hinges on one side and black iron doorknob on the other. “In his very methodical way, your buddy John called this the door of religion, which he described as justification. In order to get in the house, you are going to have to open the door. There is a whole lot, however, I need to tell you before you do. How about we rest up for a moment and just sit on the rocking chairs? Look, someone left us a couple of glasses of cold lemonade. How about we just sit and sip for awhile?”

That sounded good. Stepping onto the porch was a big deal for me. I needed to sit and think for a few moments. It’s never easy to turn your life around. But then, I had great help, didn’t I? There is no way I could have ever done it without the help of my friend. Justification—hmmm, now that’s a big word. Sounds pretty heavy to me—just like that oak door. I guess that will have to wait for next time. In the meantime I’ll just rock for a bit and let you decide if you want to step up on the porch with me. My new, but strangely familiar friend is more than ready to lend you a hand.