

Sermon for December 9, 2007

The Second Sunday in Advent

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Given at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Glenside, PA

Here we are eight days into the new year and change and expectation are all around. One change we have experienced lately is our new worship book. Get that out and look at page 16, and I will tell you about a change there that I especially like.

In the left column of page 16, at June 14, you see the commemoration of four important saints: Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus and Macrina. Only three were listed before, but now Macrina has been added. I want to tell you about her life and the way she changed and prepared the way of the Lord so that as you begin your own change of mind, your own repentance, you have an example to follow. Two of the other people listed are her brothers: Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa. Macrina was the eldest of ten children. One of her siblings died in infancy leaving her four brothers and four sisters. Her family had been Christian before she was born and had survived persecution.

Macrina's family was exceedingly wealthy, owning sizable estates in two territories called Pontus and Cappadocia, in what is present day Turkey. Pontus and Cappadocia are both located on the Black Sea, though like John the Baptist, Macrina lived in a desert, but a desert in Pontus. The family had household servants and Macrina could have lived a life of genteel leisure. But, to quote John, she repented. By that I mean, she changed her mind, and, consequently, her way of life, and prepared the way of the Lord.

Today's gospel has John telling people, "Change your mind." It isn't typically translated that way. We usually think of an agitated John demanding that people repent, but the word he uses, points us to internal change, change your mind, he tells us, be different inside, consider things in a new way, because "the king of the heavens is come near. Prepare a proper path for the Lord."

He is more explicit in his comments to the Pharisees and Sadducees. They evidently changed their minds and received John's washing, and John tells them to produce fruit worthy of their new mindset. But he also warns them not to count on their heritage. Regardless of heritage, the Lord still expects them to produce.

Macrina lived her life in this changed, productive way that John describes. She looked at her heritage which included profession of Christianity and the possibility of a leisurely life and she decided on a life of extreme Christian stewardship. She changed her mind, she repented, and focused on preparing the way of the Lord.

Now when I say "repent" I don't mean to suggest that Macrina had horrible things to admit and for which to seek forgiveness. Like most of us, she was a nice person, born and raised as a Christian. But she realized she could do more to show her love for God and she aimed everything in her life toward Jesus. She changed her mind. Her repentance was to become a more productive Christian.

Macrina lived from from 327 to 379, in the decades soon after Christianity was legalized. The Nicene Creed was accepted in 325 (two years before her birth), the bible was canonized in 367 (she would have been 40) and the Apostles' Creed was accepted in 390 (eleven years after her death). This was a century that shaped the church to be the way we know it and Macrina was a repentant and productive believer.

Here are a few highlights of her life of stewardship of the church and devotion to God. As a

child she memorized the psalms and would recite them when she rose in the morning, as she did things around the house, before meals, and at bedtime. Her brother, Gregory of Nyssa, writes, "Such parts of inspired scripture as you would think were incomprehensible to young children were the subject of the girl's studies; in particular the Wisdom of Solomon, and those parts of it especially which have an ethical bearing."

When 12 years old, she was a beauty and, Gregory writes, "a great swarm of suitors seeking her in marriage crowded round her parents." Her father chose a suitor for Macrina, but the man died before their marriage, and Macrina decided to remain single, and a virgin. This decision began Macrina's life of religious duties which changed the lives of her brothers and the community around her.

Her oldest brother Basil, listed in our new worship book as Basil the Great, Bishop of Caesarea, returned home after completing his university training. He was a senator and a skilled public speaker. Macrina quickly drew him to God and the church and Basil quit his senatorial work and renounced his property completely. She changed his mind. He lived in the desert as an ascetic for a time and finally settled back in Cappadocia where he and his friend Gregory of

Nazianzus would go out together on preaching campaigns.

In 364 Basil was called out of his ascetic life to defend orthodox Christianity against the Arian belief of the Roman Emperor. The Arians, spelled ARIAN, believed that Jesus was not divine. It remains one of the most damning heresies of the church. If the Arians had won this controversy, the parts of the creeds about Jesus being eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, begotten not made, one being with the Father, would not be in our creeds today. Basil went on to be Bishop of Caesarea, in Cappadocia and appointed Gregory of Nazianzus, the Bishop of Constantinople. Both bore much fruit.

Back at home, Macrina "persuaded her mother to give up her ordinary life and all showy style of living and to end the services of domestics to which she had been accustomed." Macrina advocated a life in which all people lived at the level of the masses.

After this change at home, toward a more God centered life, Macrina's favorite brother, Naucratus, now changed through Macrina's repentance, renounced his possessions and moved to a hermitage and lived an ascetic life. He also cared for an elderly couple who lived in the woods, even hunting for the food they ate. While hunting for their food he was killed in an

accident. His death was terrible for Macrina and her mother, but Macrina had a conquering nature and she came out of her grief stronger, rejoicing over her blessings rather than grieving about her sorrows.

The persuasive Macrina again talked to her mother and convinced her to go further in her change of mind by letting her children inherit the family's property then, and by living on a footing of "equality with the staff of maids," that is sleeping on beds like the maids beds, eating the same foods as the maids, and regarding them as equals.

Macrina sought a life that imitated the angelic life: no anger or jealousy, no hatred or pride. By casting away desires for honour and glory and ridding herself of material wealth, she was able to luxuriate in divine things. Macrina and her mother repented of their earthly wealth and enjoyed the riches of prayer and hymnody. Her brother Gregory wrote, "Nothing was left but the care of divine things." She had repented, changed her mind, as entirely as possible.

Macrina had been active in rearing her youngest brother Peter. From an early life she trained him in holy practices and as he grew up he was a virtuous and virginal man. Together Macrina and Peter opened a double monastery on the family property, though she had

given ownership of the land to the local priest. Women came to live with Macrina in the desert retreat on one side of a stream while men lived on the other side of the stream with Peter. From this place Macrina lived her remaining years praying throughout the day, and doing the physical labor needed to sustain herself, but she kept nothing for herself if someone else needed it and would even give away her own food.

Once during a famine crowds came to the retreat because Macrina and Peter were giving away the monastery's food. Gregory says so many people came for food that the desert was more like a small city.

Local people would come to her for healing when they were sick. At her funeral a local man stopped Gregory, who by then was the presiding Bishop for the territory, to tell him that at one point his young daughter had been very ill with a serious fever and when the fever went away her eye was left white and misshapen. He and his wife brought the child to Macrina who healed the child and corrected the disfigurement.

When Macrina had died and Gregory wanted to prepare her body for burial, he discovered that she had given everything away except a scarf for her head, her dress and sandals. He used one of their mother's robes to

cover her for burial.

John calls us to repent: to change our minds so that we prepare a proper path for the Lord. Poised as we are, at the beginning of the year, we are in a strong position to do just that. Early in September I talked to you about your personal stewardship commitment and asked everyone to evaluate themselves, to evaluate your time, talents and treasure. I asked some questions then, and by now you will know the answers to those questions.

-Specifically, I asked you to look at your schedule and see what it reveals: how important does your schedule show that God is in your life?

-I asked you to make a list of your talents. Once you had identified your talents, did you see the ways you use them to help build God's church?

-Third, I asked you to calculate your net worth. Do you see there how you demonstrate God's importance in your life using your material wealth?

When John issues his imperative to repent, when he tells us all to prepare a way for the Lord, we are being called to change, first our way of thinking about ourselves, to change internally, but then to also bring about change externally.

I am not talking about the person next to you in

the pew, I am talking to you about you, and to me about me. How do we need to change?

*Jesus has come and there are implications for the future.*

I hold Macrina's example before you so that you can imitate her in some ways. I see these things in her story:

-She began scripture study at a young age and memorized meaningful passages

-She kept her life simple by not marrying and by getting rid of her material things. Without a lot of stuff to take care of she could focus on God.

-Her self perception was that she was a dutiful Christian and she was unashamed for others to know that.

-She thought that living a high lifestyle contradicted the Christian ideal.

-She actively influenced her family and community so that they "repented" and changed.

-Macrina rejoiced over her blessings.

-She was fearless in giving away what she had.

-She sheltered people in her home.

-She taught the scriptures and how to pray.

You may see other things. And, if you want to know more about Macrina, Google "life of Macrina" and you

will find the biography Gregory wrote. I hope hearing about the example she set, and hearing John's imperative, leads you to a change of mind that deepens your stewardship.

We are joined together as members of the church of Christ and most of us are further joined as members of this congregation. We are at the beginning of a new period, and not only by virtue of the calendar. We are at a point where we have to change our ways and become better stewards because we have let some critical aspects of our congregation get out of shape.

Some people are very involved here and are overworked while other people say that their personal lives are too demanding to allow for congregational involvement. Some people talk about the congregation as if someone else is the congregation and they are not. I hear phrases like, "They decided this or that" as if some people are spectators instead of participants. I see that some people make regular financial contributions, but other people evidently don't make any contributions. I know that we send offering envelopes to all confirmed members, but the statements that record financial contributions show that only about half the number of members who receive envelopes actually give an offering.

John the Baptist and Macrina, and for that matter, Basil, both Gregorys, Naucratius and Peter were all ascetics. Extremists: people who lived entirely for God. Maybe none of us will reach that point in our spirituality, but their example is a guide for us. Ascetic is from a Greek word that refers to athletes. Askesis is exercise, practice, training. Think of the power of a runner. The daily discipline of a boxer. The labored breathing of a swimmer. The way a dancer concentrates. A bodybuilder pushing through the pain. That is askesis. John calls us to be spiritual athletes, to practice our faith.

John the Baptizer was preaching in the desert of Judea saying, "Change your mind. The king of the heavens is come near." John was wearing his garment of camel hair and a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem was coming out to him and all Judea and all the surrounding region of the Jordan, and they were being washed by him in the Jordan River after admitting their sins.

But seeing many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his washing he said to them, "Offspring of snakes, who indicated to you to flee from the coming wrath? There then, produce worthy fruit by a change of mind. And you should not suppose to say to yourselves,

'The father we have is Abraham.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from stones. Now, already the ax is set at the root of the tree. Thus, after not making beautiful fruit, the whole tree is being cut down and is being thrown into a fire."

"Now I wash you in water for a change of mind, but, a person is coming after me whose sandal I am not worthy to carry, he is stronger than I am. He will wash you with a holy spirit and fire, with the winnowing fork in his right hand and he will thoroughly clean this threshing floor and will gather the grain into his barn."

Amen.