

LENT—A JOURNEY TO EASTER
1. REND YOUR HEART

(03/01/2020)

Scripture Lessons: Joel 2:12-14
Luke 18:9-14

“Rend your hearts and not your clothing.” (Joel 2:13)

This past Wednesday was Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent. The season of Lent, the time set aside in preparation for the celebration of Easter, is forty days (and six Sundays) from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday. Our word “Lent” is derived from the English word *lencten*, which means “lengthen” because, at least in the Northern Hemisphere, Lent takes place as the days begin to lengthen in the season of spring.

This year I would like to offer a series of reflections on the theme of Lent as a spiritual journey to Easter, to resurrection, to new life. I would especially like to focus on several of the events leading up to Holy Week and on Jesus’ last moments with his disciples. There is simply not enough time between Palm Sunday and Easter to reflect on the deeper meaning of these dramatic events in Jesus’ life and how they find symbolic expression in our own lives.

Easter Sunday is the most important day of the church year. The Resurrection is the focal point of the Christian faith, like a keystone supporting an arch. Without the keystone, everything else is shaky and may crumble. We also need to remember that Easter is not just one day; it is also a season of celebration that begins on Easter Day and extends for fifty days to Pentecost.

Easter is the oldest festival of the church year; it was observed centuries earlier than Christmas. Actually, every Sunday is a “little Easter,” a day of celebration and never a day of fasting, not even during Lent. So, technically, we have a reprieve from our Lenten disciplines on Sundays and can enjoy the treats at the coffee hour following the service without feeling guilty. You see, sometimes this theology stuff works to our advantage!

In the early years of the church, in an attempt to emphasize the special nature of Easter, Christians moved their day of worship from Saturday, the last day of the week, the day of the Jewish Sabbath, to Sunday, the first day of the week, symbolic of Jesus’ resurrection. This also served to make the point that this spiritual movement that was coming into being was not just a variation of the Jewish religion, like a kind of reformed Judaism; it was something new.

In the Early Church, people did not celebrate Good Friday. The focus was not on the crucifixion, the sacrifice, the passion, but on the resurrection, the new life, the risen Christ. The

focus on the crucifixion and atonement came in later. This is symbolized in the difference between the crucifix, a cross with the corpus, the body of Christ on it, and the empty cross, the Resurrection Cross as the central symbol of the sanctuary and the central focus of our faith.

For the first few centuries of the church, the central focus of Holy Week was Easter. Christians met for worship at sunset on the day before Easter, Holy Saturday, and continued in fasting, prayer, and meditation until Easter morning, when they celebrated the Eucharist. In later centuries, the fasting of the Easter Vigil was extended to include Good Friday, thus setting aside a period of forty hours to commemorate the time Jesus' body lay in the tomb.

Later still, the period of fasting was extended to include all of Holy Week. By the year 600 C.E., the fast was extended to include the entire forty days prior to Easter (not including Sundays), a time which corresponds to the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness in preparation for his public ministry. The Lenten season became a time for the final preparation for catechumens, those seeking membership in the church by baptism and profession of faith.

In time, not just the catechumens but also many other church members voluntarily undertook their own self-discipline through forty days of penitence and fasting. After a period of reflection on the meaning and significance of their baptismal vows, they joined the catechumens at Easter in a proclamation of their baptismal promises. We can see from these rituals that, in the Early Church, people were baptized as adults, not infants. The Easter Vigil, which is still celebrated in the Roman Catholic, Anglican/Episcopal, and Orthodox churches, provides a yearly opportunity for all who participate to renew their baptismal vows.

One of the earliest descriptions of Lent, as well as one of the most eloquent calls to enter into the deeper meaning of Lent, comes from the theologian Gregory the Great. In an ancient hymn that dates back to the 6th century, Gregory invites us to participate in Lent as an important part of our journey toward Easter. Gregory writes:

*Again we keep this solemn fast,
A gift of faith from ages past.
This Lent which binds us lovingly
To faith and hope and charity.
Let us avoid each harmful way
That lures the careless mind astray,
That this, our Lent of forty days,
May bring us growth and give You praise.*

As we enter into the Lenten season, I would like us to begin by reflecting on the theme of repentance, one of the central themes of Lent, and its importance in preparing us for the celebration and the experience of Easter.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for repentance is *naham*. Repentance is an important part of the spiritual journey, an important step in coming to spiritual growth and maturity. We read in scripture that even God repents of his mistakes, of actions that were not well thought through, or that did not achieve his desired ends. God repents of visiting the Great Flood upon the earth at the time of Noah, and he places the rainbow in the sky as a promise to us, and as a reminder to himself, that he will never again allow his wrath to destroy the earth.

This morning, I would like us to focus on another Old Testament word that is translated in our Bible as repentance--the Hebrew word *shub*. This word means to turn back, to retrace one's steps, to return to the right way. I think of it as getting our life back on center.

In this morning's scripture lesson from the book of the prophet Joel, God calls his people to return to him, to return to him with all their heart. He tells them he wants more than the symbolic rituals of tearing or rending their clothing. He wants them to tear, to rend their hearts.

What does this mean--to rend our heart? Nobody uses this word anymore. According to Webster, to rend is "to tear apart, to split, or pull apart with violence." It is a powerful word.

I think that when the prophet Joel uses this word, he is telling us that God calls us to feel the pain we have intentionally or unintentionally inflicted on others and also on ourselves by our sin. When we sin, when our thoughts, words, and deeds are expressions of our alienation from God, from our brothers and sisters, and from the deepest parts of our self, we rend, we tear apart the fabric of God's creation. This is because other people are part of God's creation—and we are, too. When we sin, we rend the fabric of God's creation; we hurt other people and our deepest self by what we do and by what we do not do.

In asking us to actually rend, to tear our hearts, God calls us to do more than simply remember and feel sorry. God calls us to put ourselves in the shoes of the persons we have wronged, to feel their pain from the inside. When we realize how we have consciously or unconsciously sinned, the compassion we feel for those we have hurt is the tearing of the heart to which we are called. This is the foundation of true repentance.

The prophet Joel uses the Hebrew word *shub* in this passage. By his use of this word, he reminds us that repentance is more than a feeling. It is also a return. It is a return to God and to

that part, that deepest part of our self that we have betrayed. This is the return to which Jesus calls us. However, as we know from the Parable of the Prodigal Son, it is accompanied by the faith, by the assurance that God will welcome us back with open arms. The prophet Joel tells us,

*Return to the Lord, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

Our Gospel lesson this morning is the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector. This teaching came just before Jesus' entry into Jerusalem with his disciples, and it casts a spotlight on some of his actions during Holy Week. Luke tells us that Jesus "told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." This reminds me of C. S. Lewis's assertion that the worst of all sins for the Christian is the sin of pride. Lewis tells us that pride is especially damaging because it is grounded in a judgment and self-righteousness that leads us to look down on our brothers and sisters, that cuts off our relationship with God's children. Pride, which is the opposite of true humility, is the ultimate expression of egocentricity. It arises from our living our life off center. And it causes pain.

There is a difference, however, between being righteous and being self-righteous. In the first chapter of the book of Job, Job is described as follows:

There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.

In one of the translations of this passage, Job is described as a righteous man. There is little doubt that God wants us to be righteous, as Job was--to live a good life, to be as religious as the Pharisee. There is nothing wrong with the way that the Pharisee is living his life. He lives according to the Ten Commandments and the many other laws of his religion; he fasts; he tithes: he gives 10% of his income to the church. This is certainly commendable. Most churches, especially little churches like ours, would be happy to have a few more Pharisees in their congregations!

But the Pharisee's righteousness does not lead him to feel compassion for the tax collector, upon whom he passes judgment. His judgment of his brother shows that his behavioral righteousness has morphed into a kind of self-righteousness. It does not lead him to be open to the tax collector. It does not lead him to be open to Jesus. It poisons his soul. His pride regarding what he is doing well with his life blinds him to what he needs to do to experience a

deeper spirituality, a deeper relationship with God through Christ, a deeper relationship with his brothers and sisters. Jesus tells us that God wants us to be good, but even more important, he wants us to individuate, to grow, to become ourselves fully, to be self-reflective, to be honest with ourselves and to be honest with God. He wants us to be conscious of our sins, the ways we depart from the path, and to realize in true humility that we need God's help in the living of our daily life.

In this parable, Jesus tells us that true prayer begins with repentance. The tax collector, who knows very well what he is doing wrong, how he has aligned himself with the group in power, how he oppresses and probably even cheats his fellow Jews, does not even feel worthy to look up to heaven. All he could do in his prayer was beat his breast and say, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

At the end of the parable, Jesus summarizes the lesson that he hopes we will draw from it. He says that "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." Jesus is telling us that true repentance begins with honesty. Honesty gives rise to humility. And humility leads us to return to God. When we return, we experience not judgment and punishment, but forgiveness and love. When we return, like the Prodigal Son, we find that God is waiting for us with open arms. Through this process of self-reflection, humility, repentance, and return, we die to our old selves, to our egocentrism, to the source of our sin, and are reborn, with God's help, into new life.

As we join together in the Sacrament of Holy Communion at the beginning of our Lenten journey, let us reflect on the meaning and the message of the prophet Joel's teaching that God wants us to rend our hearts, and Jesus' teaching that God wants us to return to the true path, to return to the true Centre. Let us honestly, humbly, confess the ways we have become separated or alienated from God, from our brothers and sisters, and from the deepest parts of our self. Then, in an attitude of true repentance, of true humility, let us rend our heart.

If we do this, we can walk with Jesus through the Good Fridays, the dark moments of our lives, to the Easter Sundays, the resurrection that can bring us into the light of new life.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
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