

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 3/09/11 Ash Wednesday

Lent has traditionally been associated with a call to repentance. I must admit, though, that many modern preachers like me have often during Lent and during the rest of the church soft pedaled repentance or have avoided it all together. It seems that many people associate repentance with the “turn or burn” preachers who show up on street corners or in churches we aren’t always comfortable with. Or repentance is connected to these odd folks from Texas who show up at the funerals of soldiers who have been killed in war, claiming that the deaths of the soldiers are a consequence of this country’s acceptance of homosexuality and other things that they deem as sinful. We need to repent, they say.

Now I don’t want to be associated with people like them *or* with moms and dads, preachers and priests who throughout the centuries have used their power to impose shame and unnecessary guilt on many of us, turning some of us into crippled human beings who can’t seem to do anything without a constant reminder of how inadequate or naughty we are. So maybe I have avoided talk of repentance in order for me not to be lumped together with all of these folks.

It’s been a wrong move on my part, though. Repentance clearly is a frequent call from the Bible. The prophet Joel today issues that call. He says, “Blow the trumpet in Zion; blow the shofar. Sound the alarm.” The Day of the Lord is coming. The people of Israel thought that the Day of the Lord would be good news. Joel says that it is bad news. It is “a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness.” The people need to get ready. “Return to me with all your heart,” the Lord says to the people.

Joel sounds a little bit like the “turn or burn” preachers, although he is not promising life lived eternally in a fiery hell. Rather he is telling the Israelites that things are going to go bad for them in their common life if they don’t get their act together, if they don’t worship the Lord in a way that is not a matter of just outward rituals and appearances. They need, Joel says, to render (tear) their hearts, not just their clothing. It is the center of who they are, their wills that God is after. They can appear in their outward actions to be repenting, but God is not content with these actions. Rather he wants them to turn their hearts around, re-center their lives. He wants them to repent.

That call is the right call for them. It’s the right call for us. Repent! Repent, not because you will burn in the fires of hell, if you don’t, not because you are naughty or because you should feel shame about everything you have thought or done. No, repent because your hearts are oriented in the wrong direction. Repent because your life has been all about right appearances and right rituals actions, not about right hearts. Repent because your will has not been lining up with the will of God. Your appearance is good. You do the right actions. But your heart is far from God. The way you live your life doesn’t line up with who God is.

You go to church, you get the ashes imposed on your foreheads, you *do* all the right things, but you tear people down, you look down your long noses at them, you dismiss them because they are not intelligent enough, clean enough, unbroken enough. You fail to see how truly messed up you are. You are hypocritical. And then some of you are too preoccupied with how messed up you are. Others weary of your preoccupation. You are needy. It seems that everything you do

has to do with what you lack and how you think you don't measure up. It gets old.

And while I am at, some of you hold on to grudges. Forgiveness is far from your hearts. Some of you are apathetic. Some of you live life as if it is your due, as if indulging all of your desires and wants is what life is all about. Some of you haven't always been faithful. You have exploited other people. And let's be honest. Some of you waste a lot. And sometimes some of you don't really care what happens to people who are victims of injustice. Human suffering and human need sometimes are far from your concern.

Repent! Render your hearts, not your clothing. Move in a new direction. Life can be much richer. Life can be much fuller. The world doesn't need to look as it looks. It doesn't have to be such an unjust place. Some human suffering doesn't need to exist. Your relationships need not be so messy and ugly. They can be experiences of great joy.

Over the past couple of weeks I have been reflecting on what repentance can bring to our lives and our relationships. I have been mindful of how our lack of repentance keeps our relationships from becoming what they could become. We would be amazed at what would happen to our relationships if we would come to people and say, "We haven't been the people we should be; we have blown it. Forgive us and give us a new chance to take our relationship to a new place." We turn our hearts, and then we act on that change. We live differently. And then our relationships are transformed. Repent because repentance opens up the possibility for new life, for reconciliation, for a world that lines up much more with the heart and will of God. Repent, people! Life entangled in sin is not life as it could be.

Repent; return to the Lord! And oh by the way, God doesn't really get a lot of joy from your living in the mess that your sin is, just as you as a parent don't get a lot of joy from watching your child live with the consequences of their bad choices. You see, God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abound in steadfast love. God relents from punishing. Not only **should** you repent, you are **free** to repent. Go ahead and do it. God is gracious. God is merciful. God is abounding in steadfast love. You return to God, and you are discovered by love. Love is waiting for you. Love compels you to turn your lives toward it.

I urge you throughout Lent as we travel with Jesus to the cross to pay attention to the love that is after your heart. Turn toward it! Return to the Lord with all your heart.