

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Reflection for Ash Wednesday, March 9, 2011
Scripture Readings: Isaiah 44:21-28 and Mark 1:14-15

SUNFLOWER

We live in an age that likes numbers – quite literal numbers, as in the counting of something precisely. So, let me start there. The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible in English uses the word “repent,” exactly so, only forty-five times. Understand, that literal count does not include the other forms of the same word, such as “repents,” “repented,” “repenting,” or “repentance” which would exactly double the number of occurrences to ninety. “So what?” you ask. In English, all forms of the word “repent” have to do with regret or remorse or even with self-loathing.

So, how do you feel about Ash Wednesday, a Christian day of repentance? The symbolism of the ashes comes from the ancient biblical custom of tearing one’s clothes in anguish and sitting down in dust and ashes. The meaning is quite clear. My life, my soul, my very self is torn, and all my pride and joy, my dreams and aspirations are now reduced to ash. The mood is one of grief for which I blame no one but myself.

Well, that’s not pleasant, is it? No, but even so, remorse has its place in any hope for the soul’s healing, and anyone who can at last see and face up to his or her own cruelty without remorse has become truly evil. When we see the harm we have done other people, especially if we intended or enjoyed it, we are meant to feel something of guilt or shame. To be shameless is not a good thing. So, even though we hate the feelings of regret and remorse, we probably admit that it is necessary to our moral and spiritual health to be able to feel them.

Remorse, however, is only a part of repentance, and the numbers I gave you at the outset do not really tell the story. We have a problem because our faith has so much become identified with guilt and shame that people either shy away from it or else seek some easier, nicer, more pleasant variation on Christianity that only comforts and encourages, always upbeat, never challenging attitudes or questioning virtues. The reason the numbers fail to tell the whole story is that in English we use forms of the word “repent” only in those places where the Bible is calling for remorse. The basic meaning of the Hebrew word is not to feel remorse but to “turn” or “return.”

Now, obviously, if I am facing one way and suddenly turn around to face in the opposite direction, I am both turning toward something and turning away from something else. Right? Having done an about-face, I am leaving the old behind and facing the new. Anyone familiar with a twelve-step program for overcoming an addiction and embracing the freedom of a new way of life can tell us that both understandings are needed: that I am turning away from something that hurts me and toward something else that offers me hope and freedom to live as the person I am created to become and be. I cannot simply give something up and leave myself empty. The negative of turning away from the old is insufficient for sustained change and freedom, because the old is still the thing that matters and the focus of my attention, and so it calls to me. I must also and even more importantly be turning toward something new and life-giving.

As we meet him in the New Testament, John the Baptist emphasizes *the turning away from*, but Jesus emphasizes *the turning toward*. By announcing that the kingdom or reign of God has come near, Jesus calls us to turn toward God's coming to us to restore human life to its rightful nature as related life. Sin is the denial and rejection of relatedness – our relatedness to God and our relatedness to each other. The early chapters of Genesis show us the breakdown. The humans deny their need for God and push God away. Then the man blames the woman for his newfound shame. The humans are alienated from the earth and the other creatures. Brother kills brother in jealous rage, and revenge become the new manhood with its twisted form of honor. “Nations and peoples, lo, we stand divided, and sharing not our griefs, no joys may share.” So, instead of telling us, “Don't do this or this or that,” Jesus sums up the goal of turning ourselves and our lives with the two positive commands, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your being and capacity,” and, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” For him, repentance is primarily our turning back to God and to each other so that God's love can restore the relatedness that makes us truly human. That's why his announcement, his gospel, is called good news. For him and, he believes, for us, God's coming is the best of all good news.

Please do not misunderstand what I am saying. I am not calling for an upbeat Christian faith that is all celebrating and accentuating the positive. Millions of earth's people live in various forms of slavery. That's not cause for celebration. Greed and self-entitlement run rampant, and the winners revel in self-congratulation. A psalmist speaks to God of people who lie on their beds at night plotting harm to the vulnerable or trusting, and in that regard, times have not changed; the plots have simply grown more sophisticated.

Even so, Jesus does not turn away from us and our world in disgust but reaches out in hope of restoring the lost or broken. “I have come,” he says to us still, “that they may have life and have it abundantly.” But the abundant life he gives must be related life, shared and generous life. He did not come to keep pushing us down into guilt and shame but to set us

free so we can live with a new kind of dignity and strength that will not be put down but will not seek to put down others, either.

It's very hard to turn around and stay turned around. Dignity requires more strength than self-pity, and freedom, though wonderful, needs daily effort to sustain. A big part of turning is forgiving ourselves even as we forgive others, and that's not easy – forgiving ourselves – but trusting God's love for us makes it possible.

Lent is just a season of the year, a time prescribed by our faith for looking inward at our minds, hearts, and souls but with the hope for turning, for change, that comes from being loved by Someone greater, more understanding, and more compassionate than we have ever been with ourselves. Shame is a great enemy – necessary lest we be shameless and so grow monstrous, but deadly when it takes over and pushes us to attack ourselves or someone else. We speak of beating ourselves up or putting ourselves down, and feeling unworthy and unworthwhile, we feel disgust either with ourselves or with some other who becomes our scapegoat.

Christian faith should not foster shame, but it has, and it still does. “The time is fulfilled (the waiting is over), and the kingdom of God (the rule of redemptive love) has come near; turn, and believe in the good news (trust in God's commitment to our restoration and wholeness).”

Lent is just a season of the church year, but if we will, we can make it an opportunity for turning more consciously and purposefully toward the hope Jesus Christ gives us. Dignity and freedom are good things, as long as we don't gain them at someone else's expense. Pride can be the opposite of humility, but then it is arrogance. Pride can also be the opposite of shame, and then it is the self-acceptance of a person at home in his or her own skin as a child of God.

Jesus is our guarantor that turning toward God's redemptive love is not just another New Year's resolution made to be broken so shame can deepen as hope for real change is beaten down once again. We are not just turning away but turning toward the one who loves us and can restore us to each other and make it possible truly to love ourselves and be healed and whole. Amen.