

March 1, 2017  
Ash Wednesday  
Joel 2:12-19

Repentance is a churchy word we use a lot, but its basic meaning is simply to turn, to turn away from something or turn toward something; to change direction or even perhaps to change one's mind.

As Lent begins a lot of people take up the custom of turning away from something; alcohol, ice cream, facebook, whatever. The reasons folks do this are probably as different as people are from each other, but most are basically doing this in an attempt to spur themselves toward greater devotion to God. They are turning away from something in order to turn toward Jesus.

Why? Ash Wednesday usually makes that very, very clear. For the past nine years folk have come up toward the chancel at the beginning of this service and I have said the same words: "From dust you came, and to dust you shall return."

There is no Gospel in that phrase. There is no good news to be had in "From dust you came, and to dust you shall return." That phrase...that truth...declares that your life, everything you hold dear, everything for which you have a passion, all of your love, hate, joy and suffering, means nothing for "From dust you came, and to dust you shall return." I you doubt this is biblical thinking, just take in the poetic writing in the book of Ecclesiastes. "*Vanity of vanities, ' says the Preacher, 'vanity of vanities! All is vanity.'*" In other words, all is meaninglessness, all is emptiness.

Being reminded that we came from dust and in death we will return to dust is nothing but harsh law. And God willing, it does its job and makes us turn, desperately turn, to our Creator who brought us forth from the dust and beg He not allow us to return there.

Of course, this is the right thing to do. God tells us so through His prophet: *“Yet even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God...”* Our faithful repentance is right and good. Yet, our turning from our sin and toward God should not be our main focus in Lent or any other time of the year. Jesus Christ says at the end of a pretty understandable parable, *“So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’”* Our turning from sin is simply turning back to operating as we were created to in God’s design of love. There is no merit there. There is no hope there. That doesn’t stop, *“to dust you shall return.”* The repenting, the turning, in which we find hope is not ours.

I went to Monday night’s parade to show Pastor Simoneaux and his family from Harvey where to park and sit. Bridgette stayed home because she hates parades. One of the floats threw out these black, plastic spiders and I grabbed several. So later that night, being the loving husband that I am, I put the spiders under the sheet on Bridgette’s side of the bed. They had the desired effect. Bridgette screamed, jumped back, and had these spiders been alive, she would have immediately shunned them and sought out their destruction.

This is the same type of reaction our Heavenly Father could have, justly should have, had when His human creatures became vile in sin. A holy God is revolted by sin and should have shunned and banished us to eternal death. But He does not. He turns. He repents of that direction. Why? *“...for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him”*

Our comfort is not that we turn toward God. Our comfort is that God turned toward us. Our hope is that rather than distancing His perfect holiness from our wretchedness, God the Father went the other direction and sent His Son to join with our cursed dust-to-dust humanity. Rather than be a God far away, He turned to be a God near us and in us, doing battle with sin and Satan and winning. Rather than leaving us to the death our sins deserve, He turned toward the cross to there take our death and sin upon Himself.

There is no comfort in “to dust you will return” because that is our death. The comfort is that God made man for us does not see corruption—dust not to dust return! In His resurrection our story also does not end in dust—does not end at all, but begins in Christ’s resurrection and endures unto life everlasting! The dust in the sign of the cross on your forehead symbolizes your hope; that the man/God who hung on that cross is not dust, but reigns as Lord and Savior this day and forever. It is His Holy Spirit who calls you to repentance. And it is He who speaks through His Word in His church those sweet words, “I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

I encourage everyone to make Lent a special time of devotion. If giving up a favorite treat or activity encourages you toward this end and aids reflection on God and His Word this is indeed helpful and pleasing in the sight of the Lord.

But let’s all remember the truth of our situation. It’s not about our repentance. It’s not about our faith. It’s not about us at all, how we are turning toward God.

This is about God turning toward you and me and not seeing us for our sin and rebellion, but seeing as us His creation; the object of His unfathomable love. This is about God repenting of His wrath by sending that wrath upon Himself/His Son. There is no comfort in your sacrifice were it not for the perfect sacrifice of Christ Jesus on the cross.

Were it not for God turning to you in love, there would be nothing for you but dust and death for there would be no salvation to which to turn. But God has turned to us in Christ. He turns to us in the water of Baptism. He turns to us in the bread and the wine. He turns to us in the Word.

He calls us to repentance because, thanks to the cross, we can. We turn to Christ's cross and see God saving us from the dust and ashes. We take comfort knowing that though death and dust may be how all things of this life come to an end, Jesus already has seen us through it to life that does not.

Christ has turned to you, and to Christ you shall return.

Amen.