
Turning Towards the Love of God

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The Cathedral of St. Philip
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Ash Wednesday
Isaiah 58:10-12

A number of years ago I set out on one of my favorite pilgrimage routes. I was on my way to the Green Bough House of Prayer for a retreat. I engaged in my liturgy as I always do. I stopped for gas at the same place I always do. I purchased the same snacks I always buy. Just before I crossed the line where I will lose cell coverage, I called my husband to tell him I'd almost arrived, and I pull into the same spot in front yard upon arrival (It is in South Georgia after all).

On this particular occasion, I was really weary. I needed my "fix" badly. So with great anticipation I arrived and entered the guest house. I was home. I needed to collapse into my room, take a nap, and enter in to my time. As I walked down the hall, I discovered a terrible problem. Someone was already in MY room. The door was shut and I could hear snores wafting into the silence. I was taken aback. You would have thought I was one of the three bears who had just discovered the wreckage of Goldilocks.

Frankly, I was shocked by the strength of my reaction. Now up until that point, I would have admitted a preference for that room. I would have told you about the wonderful times I had spent there. How much the Thomas Merton prayer on the wall meant. The comfort I took in the dated green and white bedspread. The pleasure I took in seeing the front yard through a set of broken yellowed venetian blinds.

But I had missed the subtle turn where my preference had turned into an idol. I missed the moment my attachment turned to possessiveness. I missed the point when it was all about me and any sense of community was dismissed.

Well, I grumpily settled into another room, feeling mightily sorry for myself. I was like a two year old whose hand had been smacked while reaching for the candy jar. I didn't care about the needs of the person in my room, and I certainly wasn't grateful for the fresh flowers in the room I currently occupying. It was if I had decided God was so scarce and unavailable, that God was hidden under that green and white bedspread. If I couldn't be there, I was separated from God.

Later that day I went to the chapel to pray. I was still angry. But, as I sat in the silence, I was overcome with guilt. I felt like the most ungrateful person on the planet. I had years of staying in that room, which had been pure gift. I had years of patience from my spiritual director and the care she had given me. How could I be so selfish in a place that had done nothing but support and love me all these years? How did I imagine that the lesson from all of that was to be that God was limited? Why was I fiercely protective and vigilant, rather than open and loving?

The longer I sat in the silence, the more I felt I needed to demonstrate my remorse. I loved this community and I was newly aware that it was not my place. It was God's place and I had no more claim on it than anyone else. I wanted to outwardly acknowledge this. In our tradition's language, I wanted to do some act of penance to restore me to the community and to a

proper place of relationship within it.

Now, I happen to think penance has gotten a bad rap. We often think it is an outwardly imposed punishment that demonstrates how innately bad or sinful we are. Penance is when we are to take our already guilty consciences and flog them deeper into a place of complete self loathing. Then, when we feel well and truly bad we might know we need God.

But is that how it really works? The times I have been loved the best are when I want to be better. It is when I feel secure in God's love that I am able to see myself and things as they truly are. It is when I know that God's love for me is not predicated on my good actions, that I allow my own failings to enter my awareness. And in those moments, I want some way to acknowledge my longing for return.

Any genuine act of penance does not make us feel worse. It assures us of the love and care of God. It is our turning back to the way we want to be in the light of God's love. It is the discovery that our human limits are a gift and not a curse.

Today is Ash Wednesday and we will soon smudge our foreheads with symbols of our limits and mortality. We will be told to remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return. This year more than ever I hear it as a call to remember. And remembering is a choice.

The church gives us an opportunity for repentance in season of Lent. And we get to choose. We can push it off as too depressing or historically pass it off. We can think of sin as only the purview of traditions that have scarred us or left us unaware of God's love. We can think to repent is to admit a basic fault in our nature and far too scary to contemplate.

Or, we can choose it. We can see repentance as a gift--an invitation to turn ever more closely towards the source of our being. We can choose to remember.

Deep down, I believe we long to remember. We are tired of carrying what is really God's burden. We want to remember our limits so we can experience the freedom that comes not from having to earn God's love, but from our experience of being beloved. We want to remember the God who created us, not the one we have gradually downsized.

When we remember, we are no longer able to shrink God to a size that fits conveniently under a green and white bedspread. When we remember our own limitations, we will not be able to discard the concerns of our neighbor because of theirs. When we remember, we will not be able to see acts of love and charity through a lens of entitlement and smallness.

We will have the same vision of as Isaiah who remind us,

"If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.
The LORD will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail."

After I continued to pray in the chapel that day, I prayed for wisdom. I prayed for some outward act that would acknowledge my fault and restore me to a place of grace and peace. I don't know what I imagined the answer would be, but the one I got was surprising. I heard clear as a bell, "Clean my house." And for some reason, that day I knew it was a more literal command than a metaphorical one. So my prayer that day was accomplished by dusting, polishing, and vacuuming. As I ran the cloth over the places I had loved so dearly, I gave them back to where they had always belonged. I gave them back to God.

Amen

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