

FROM FEAR TO LOVE
Sermon: February 17, 2010
Ash Wednesday

Lessons: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Grace, mercy and peace be yours from God our Creator and from Jesus the Christ.

I will begin this sermon with my own confession. I am not ready for this Lenten season to begin. It seems only a few short weeks ago that we were beginning the Advent/Christmas/Epiphany cycle of our church year, centered on the birth of Christ. But today we begin the Lent/Holy Week/Easter cycle, centering on the death and resurrection of Christ. This transition seems abrupt, unnatural. So I am not ready for this Lenten season. But ready, or not, it has arrived.

Lent means literally “coming to life.” It gets its name from the fact that during the Lenten season, at least in the Northern Hemisphere, spring arrives. Slowly, the sun is reasserting itself. We will soon see the snow all melt away and the green stuff of life reappear all around us.

As things come alive all around us, the Christian faithful are invited to observe the Lenten season and prepare for Easter, the great spring celebration of life, the Day of the Resurrection. We accomplish this preparation through a six-and-a-half- week observance that begins with Ash Wednesday and concludes with Holy Week.

Journey Between Two Crosses

In many ways, Lent is a journey between two crosses. The first cross is the palm ash of Ash Wednesday traced on our foreheads. This cross reminds us of who we are; we come from dust and we return to dust. And in between the “coming from” and the “returning to” we are invited to live each moment mindful of our beginnings and our endings. We are also invited to live each moment in faith, knowing that we are born from grace, and have come this far on our journey by faith.

The second cross is the cross of Golgotha. There we are reminded of the great sacrifice that God gave to us so through the death of Jesus we may know the power of life. Though we are reminded of death throughout this Lenten journey, our ultimate goal is the affirmation of life, the joy of life lived fully, lovingly, and authentically. This cross is further symbolized by the sign of the cross traced on the forehead at Baptism.

Three Lenten Practices

It is the tradition of the liturgical church to practice three disciplines during the Lenten season. Each is an important part of the journey. Each helps to grow stronger, deeper, and more committed to our faith.

The first practice is the **Lenten fast**. Most people think of this of giving up something you love for six weeks. So many people half-heartedly give up something not too difficult. However, the meaning and purpose of the fast is deeper and more significant than giving up candy and sweets. The purpose of the fast is give up those things that are not good and healthy for us, those things that get in the way of our living lives fully, lovingly, and authentically.

The second practice is **prayer**. The purpose of prayer during the Lenten season is to draw us more deeply into life-giving relationships with each other. When we seek to keep our life in balance, we must constantly be in communion with each other. An unknown author writes:

A world cut off from God can never hope to be a place of life. Lent is the time for us to have a deep heart-to-heart with the creator who made us, the redeemer who claims us, the sanctifier who brings us to renewal. Lent is a time for listening and speaking, for entering the cycle of communication that leads to life. (Sundays & Seasons; 2006, p. 106)

The third Lenten practice is **acts of kindness**. Some traditions call this “alms-giving.” Although Lent tends to take us inward into our deepest selves, we do this not only for ourselves. For by going inward we realize the need to move outward, beyond ourselves and towards others. We follow the path of Jesus, who showed his compassion and kindness towards others in a way that transformed their lives. We can each give or ourselves in a variety of ways that helps to transform the lives of others during this Lenten season.

These three Lenten practices, as well as all the other activity of Lent, hovers around the Greek word **metanoia**. Metanoia means to turn away from, to have a change of heart, to repent. It is in changing our hearts and our minds that we bring the old way of life to an end and embrace a new live that comes from Jesus’ open tomb.

Lenten theme 2010

The theme of our Lenten Season is *From Fear to Love: Lenten Reflections on the Parable of the Prodigal Son*. To provide a visual of this theme, we have the Rembrandt portrait, “*The Return of the Prodigal Son*.” This painting powerfully captures the moment in the parable from the Gospel of Luke when the son returns home to the father. He is down on his knees begging for his father’s forgiveness. The harshness of his life away from home is portrayed by his torn and tattered clothes and shoes. The father reaches out to embrace his weary son and gathers him into his chest. The look on the father’s face is one of pity and

compassion. A light shines down on the two figures bathing them in comforting warmth.

Off to the side, almost in the shadows is the older son. The look on his face is one of anger. He seems unable to look at the father. His focus is on the younger son; a look of contempt and resentment. His hands are stiff, his body rigid.

The parable of the prodigal son is really a story of two lost sons. Henri J.M. Nouwen writes:

The younger son gets lost in a far more spectacular way than his elder brother – giving into his lust and his greed, using women, gambling, and losing his money. His wrongdoing is very clear-cut. He knows it and everybody else does too. Because of that, he's able to come back and be forgiven. (From Fear to Love, p. 13)

About the older son, Nouwen writes:

The elder son in the parable did the objectively good thing and might have been praised for being the "good one" because he faithfully stayed home to support his old father. But he ends up being just as lost spiritually as the younger brother who ran off and squandered his fortune. The elder son is lost in a very different way than his brother. The elder is not free in his relationship with the father because he is bound by resentment. (FFTL, p. 12)

During Lent we are reminded that apart from God, the Source of Life and Love and Being, we are lost and broken. We are invited to repent and return home to the embrace of a loving God. We are challenged to examine those resentments that prevent us from participating in the abundance grace of God.

In Rembrandt's painting the younger son has moved out of the darkness and into the light symbolizing a journey from the fear of living in a strange land to the joy of returning home. And in doing so, he finds the perfect love of a gracious father.

Nouwen writes,

Perfect love is the love of a God who is not needy, who doesn't cling to us, who leaves us free to love as we decide, and who gives love freely. This love of God for you will gradually – sometimes even suddenly – just dissipate your fears.... When you make space for God and begin to listen to God's loving voice, you suddenly start to realize perfect love. As you claim God's awesome embrace, you can gradually let go of your fear. Then the fear may come back and you will realize that the whole struggle of our lives is to return again and again, from fear to love. Every time you feel afraid again and you open yourself to hear god's voice, you will be brought back to your true self and have greater freedom to love and be loved. (FFTL, p. 11-12)

Ready or not, our Lenten journey now begins. We begin by recognizing that apart from God we are lost and broken, living lives of fear. Our goal is to return home to the embrace of God the Father, the source of life, love and being. As we say in our Gospel acclamation:

Return to the Lord our God, who gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Thanks be to God!

Resources:

Nouwen, Henri J. M., *From Fear to Love: Lenten Reflections on the Parable of the Prodigal Son*. Edited by Mark Neilsen and Sue Mosteller for Creative Communications for the Parish.

Nouwen, Henri J. M., *The Return of the Prodigal Son; A Story of Homecoming*. New York, Doubleday, 1994.