

The Gift of Repentance



Meditations on Biblical Prayers of Repentance

Lenten Meditations for 2019
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Introduction

Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?
—Romans 2:4

Many years ago a group of us from the parish went skydiving. We did a tandem jump with US Army Rangers. I can tell you all about it, describing the view, the feel of the air as we did the free fall, and the quiet hush after the parachute opened. But until you get in an airplane, fly to 10,000 feet and jump out, you will not KNOW what it is like. You must experience it for it to be real for you.

Repentance is a gift. It is a gift that must be received. It is a gift that will become real for you only when you ask for it and accept it. The fact that repentance is a gift is hard for some people to comprehend. Many see it as an obligation, a punishment, or an act of the will. When we hear the word “repent” we often imagine a impassioned preacher painting a word picture of sinners dangling over the fires of hell from the hand of an angry God. But the image given to us in Holy Scripture is something quite different. In the biblical stories that follow, we will see that, in His love, God issues an invitation for us to repent. Yes, the one repenting has strayed from the Holy Way, but it is God’s Love, not His anger, that is calling the wayward ones to return to Him. He wants us to be reunited with Him, and so in His mercy He calls us to repentance. Until we desire and accept that call, we won’t experience it. It will remain something we can hear about and maybe vicariously thrill to, but a gift given must be received.

It is also important for us to recognize that repentance is not a one-time experience. It is a lifestyle, an ongoing journey, a new way of life. Martin Luther’s first thesis of his 95 reads: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said ‘Repent’ (Mt. 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” And Dietrich Bonhoeffer described the life of repentance as “costly discipleship.” Repentance is not simply a decision we make or an action we take, but the death of our old selves, the costly price of our whole lives. And that is a gift that can only come from God.

We cannot experience it without God's aid. Repentance is a gift available to all. You only have to die to self and be reborn in Christ to receive it.

Bishop Jones says that repentance is always trading up. It is giving up what God has shown you to be worthless, and trading up for the valuables of the Kingdom. You cannot lose. It is a gift. The gift of repentance. The gift of new life!

The majority of the stories that follow are primarily from the Old Testament. There are stories of repentance in the New Testament and they are worth reading. For example, we have the woman caught in adultery (John 8:2-11), and the woman who wiped Jesus' feet with her hair (Lk. 7:36-48). There is the parable of the Pharisee and publican (Lk. 18:9-14), and wee little Zacchaeus (Lk. 19:1-10). I would commend these to you. However, in these and other New Testament stories we have very few prayers of the repentant recorded. It is the prayers of the penitent that are the focus of the meditations which follow, and so we will concentrate on these.

We will pray with King David, both an adulterer and murderer, but through the gift of repentance was called a man after God's own heart. Daniel prayed for the Lord's gift of repentance on behalf of the entire nation "with fasting and sackcloth and ashes" (9:3). In praying for the restoration of Jerusalem, Nehemiah the governor "sat down and wept, and mourned for days" (Neh. 1:4,10) for all the Jews. And the evil king, Manasseh, "when he was in distress, entreated the favor of the Lord" (2 Chron. 33:12). And from the New Testament we have the story of Peter. Though he denied even knowing Jesus, he later repented and turned back to Him. We have their prayers, and they are all instructive for us as we walk through this season of repentance. Read about their experiences, but don't settle for less than the full gift of God's grace. Pray their prayers with them. Trade up for the valuables of the Kingdom. Accept the invitation and experience the gift of repentance for yourself.

Ash Wednesday March 6, 2019

Our Prayer of Repentance

Read Psalm 32

Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. —Collect for Ash Wednesday (BCP)

"Create and make in us new and contrite hearts!" This is our prayer for repentance to "the God of all mercy," that "we may obtain of you, perfect remission and forgiveness..." We are asking for the gift of repentance, a gift from the fount of God's mercy. As St. Paul reminds us in his letter to Rome, it is God's kindness that leads to repentance (Rom. 2:4). God's desire is not to be punitive, rather restorative. He is desperately seeking to reestablish His relationship with us. We broke that relationship. He will restore it.

Psalm 32 is one of the penitential psalms of David found in our Psalter. King David proclaims that "When I declared not my sin, my body wasted away..." (v. 3). Then he describes how God actively pursued him, that "day and night thy hand was heavy upon me" (v. 4). The Lord wanted to restore His relationship with the king, and David responded: "I acknowledged my sin" (v. 5). As a result, David rejoiced: "Steadfast love (i.e. mercy) surrounds him who trusts in the Lord. Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!" (vv. 10-11).

Receiving the gift of repentance brings fullness of joy. It is like the pleasure of a hot shower after a strenuous day's work in the yard. There is the joy of getting clean, the relief of aches caused by the worldly work, and the refreshing removal of dirt. As St. Peter says, the gift "saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 3:21). We are made clean, fully renewed in Him through the gift of repentance.

Thursday After Ash Wednesday
March 7, 2019

He Knows the Secrets of Your Heart

For he knows the secrets of the heart. —Psalm 44:21

In December of 1970 my father was turning yellow. The cause of the oncoming jaundice was unknown. The doctors first treated him for hepatitis, but that proved unhelpful. His health quickly deteriorated and the only option left was exploratory surgery. They opened his abdomen and found a grapefruit sized tumor on his pancreas. Without that surgery they would not have been able to diagnose the problem.

King David makes an appeal to God to “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!” (Psalm 139:23). He wants to get right with God, and he knows that there are issues in his life that need attention, healing. He is asking God to perform exploratory surgery on his heart. He is saying, “Find out what is wrong, O God, and cut it out before it does permanent harm.”

Are we seeking God’s discernment of what is amiss in our lives. Whatever it is that is out of order will not come as a surprise to God, “For He knows the secrets of the heart.” Lent is the perfect time for us to make our prayer that God will search out the secrets of our hearts and bring to light every lurking evil. Just as a patient might appeal to the surgeon to cut deep and spare nothing so that the hidden trouble may be rooted up and cast away, we need to appeal to God to excise every root of evil in our lives that we may be truly free.

Ask God, who knows the secrets of the heart, to search yours.

Friday After Ash Wednesday
March 8, 2019

True Contrition

*The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise. — Psalm 51:17*

After my ordination to the diaconate, God blessed me with a very wise and discerning confessor. Fr. Finan was a Dominican monk who taught at the University of Dallas and agreed to meet me for spiritual direction. At our first meeting, I asked if I might make my confession. He heard my confession, then became very quiet. I waited. The silence lingered for what seemed to be an interminable length of time. Finally, Fr. Finan looked me in the eye and asked, “are you confessing or bragging? I heard no contrition, no admission of true sorrow for your sins.”

How do we get to that place of true sorrow? Perfect contrition comes by honestly examining one’s life. It means allowing God to reveal the pain that our faults have caused Him and others. True contrition comes in the recognition that our hard heart, our heart of stone as Ezekiel calls it (36:26), must be broken. It is only when our heart is broken with the things that break God’s heart that we can honestly confess to God that we are genuinely sorry for our sins.

To think that God wants us to be broken seems harsh. However, when we understand that a broken heart and broken spirit are necessary before a new heart and a new spirit can be birthed within us, then the Lord’s will seems far less harsh. When that understanding takes root in our souls then we can get a glimpse of God’s incredible love for us. He is the Creator, and He is our Re-creator. “Behold, I make all things new,” says the Lord, “these words are trustworthy and true.” (Rev. 21:5)

Ask God to break your heart with what breaks His. Then there will be room for a new heart and a new spirit within us.

**Saturday After Ash Wednesday
March 9, 2019**

Turning Around

*When the wicked turns from his wickedness,
and does what is lawful and right, he shall live by it. — Ezekiel 33:19*

Real men don't ask for directions—even when they are lost and know they are going the wrong way. Sadly, as sinners, we all too often act like “real men,” too proud to ask for help, too stubborn to turn around, too fearful of what might be required to get back on the right track. We would rather stumble around in the mire of unconfessed sin than admit we need help to extricate ourselves. And so we shun the gift of repentance.

As Ezekiel prophesied in the verse above, true repentance is a turning around, a recognition that the road we are on is taking us in the wrong direction; it is taking us away from God. When that recognition finally dawns on us, then we can turn around and begin heading back toward God and His infinite love. In the New Testament, the Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, which means “to turn around”, appears twenty-two times as a noun and thirty-eight times as a verb. The call to repentance resonates throughout the New Testament. The word appears 60 times in the 27 books of the New Covenant.

The Way to new life is found in relationship with Christ Jesus. If we are walking a way that is contrary to “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” then we are not walking in new life. We are on the way to separation and death. The gift of repentance is the gift of life—New Life in Jesus Christ. The process is simple, as simple as turning around. When we turn back to Jesus and ask for His forgiveness, He is quick to respond. Then we are facing the right way and the Holy Spirit can help us to keep on the Way and begin the process of cleansing and purifying our lives, making us love and live by “what is lawful and right.” In that there is great joy.

**The First Week of Lent:
David's Repentance in Psalm 51
Sunday, March 10, 2019**

Read 2 Samuel chapters 11 & 12

We begin our meditations on the prayers of repentance with King David. St. Paul tells us that God describes David as “a man after my heart, who will do all my will” (Acts 13:22). But David was not without sin. And as we see in the reading today, his sins were many, and some were truly heinous. So what made God so fond of the king? It was David's heart for God and his quick response to God's call to repentance. He both desired and pursued God's gift of repentance. That made him a man after God's own heart.

When the prophet Nathan confronted David with his various sins surrounding the king's dalliance with Bathsheba, David did not seek to hide his sin. He was quick to respond. “David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the Lord.’” And the Lord was equally quick to forgive. “And Nathan said to David, ‘The Lord also has put away your sin...’” (2 Samuel 12:12-13).

We all too often think that if God really knew what we are like He couldn't forgive us. Surprise! He knows what we are really like and He is anxious to love us back into relationship with Him. As we have already seen this past Thursday, “He knows the secrets of the heart.” There is nothing we have done that will surprise Him. Nevertheless, we believe the lie of the evil one who tells us that our sin is too heinous to be forgiven, or God's judgment will be too harsh for us to endure. Or on the other hand, the tempter tells us that we deserve a break and we need to bypass the process of repentance. Besides, all of that stuff is too hard. If God is truly loving He wouldn't make us go through all of that. Not true!

Let us walk the way of repentance with the man after God's heart. And let us pray Psalm 51 with king David, appealing to God's mercy to wash us thoroughly and cleanse us from our sin.

Monday of 1 Lent
March 11, 2019

Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love; according to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! —Psalm 51:1-2

In the thirty plus years that I have been doing prison ministry, I have met and ministered to some serious offenders. Being inside the wire is a constant reminder to them that most people on the outside are pleased with their incarceration—they are where they belong! As a result, most of these men find it hard to believe that God does not look on them with that same contemptuous expression. There is simply no way that a loving God could forgive me, a heinous sinner. They think, “Amazing Grace cannot apply to my life because my crime is too abominable.”

King David was an adulterer, and in order to hide that misdeed he conspired to murder his lover’s husband. Abominable! Nevertheless, he cried out to the Lord for mercy. How could he do that? Certainly his crimes were far too wicked, well beyond the pale of what a compassionate God would be willing to forgive. But David knew. He knew God. He knew that God’s heart and His loving kindness were boundless. David knew that God’s desire was that everyone would return to Him regardless of how far they had strayed. And David’s prayer reflected that confidence: “Have mercy on me, O God, **according to thy steadfast love; according to thy abundant mercy** blot out my transgressions” (*emphasis added*). His appeal was not based on any human measure of worth; he had no recourse but to throw his life before the mercy of the righteous judge of all the earth.

“But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon those who fear him...” (Psalm 103:17). My friends in prison often find that hard to believe. And those on the outside sometimes seem equally reluctant to accept that truth. Do you believe that God’s merciful love is greater than your sins?

Tuesday of 1 Lent
March 12, 2019

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. —Psalm 51:3

The Prayers of the People, Form VI, in the *Book of Common Prayer*, conclude with this confession of sin:

Have mercy upon us, most merciful Father;
in your compassion forgive us our sins,
known and unknown,
things done and left undone;
and so uphold us by your Spirit
that we may live and serve you in newness of life,
to the honor and glory of your Name;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We cry out for God to forgive our sins “known and unknown.” David claims that he knew his transgressions. It is important for us to acknowledge our sins before God in order to show true contrition and repentance. So how is it possible that we have sinned without knowing it?

Billy Graham offers this explanation: “Often we sin, and aren’t even aware of it. We may say something that hurts another person, or do something from wrong or selfish motives—and not even realize it. But listen: God knows our hearts, and if we are truly sorry for our sins, he has promised to forgive all of them. Let your prayer be that of the Psalmist: ‘Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults ... Then will I be blameless’ (Psalm 19:12-13).”

It is very important for us to acknowledge our sins when we come before God seeking His forgiveness and mercy. But “Who can discern his errors?” Ask God to reveal those “hidden faults” so that you can both confess them and avoid them in the future; so that, as the confession above says, “you may live and serve Him in newness of life.”

Wednesday of 1 Lent March 13, 2019

*Against thee, thee only, have I sinned
and done that which is evil in thy sight... —Psalm 51:4*

How is it that David can claim that his sin is against God alone. Is he honestly claiming that he has not sinned against another person. Yet, he took Bathsheba, likely against her will, and committed adultery with her. He violated Uriah's wife and in order to hide that vile offense had him murdered. He commanded Joab to commit the murder of Uriah, and endangered many others in order to accomplish that evil deed. How then can he claim that he committed a sin against God alone?

David's sin is primarily disobedience to God. He transgressed against God's Word. He separated himself from God, from His love, and from the mercy promised to those who walk in intimate relationship with God. And the king recognized that the separation he created caused him to walk in unrighteousness toward others. His sin against Bathsheba, Uriah, Joab, and others is grievous, but the root of that sin was his prideful alienation from God. In his heart David may have been saying, "I'm the king, I can do whatever pleases me," and in that moment of unchecked pride the law disappeared in an unrighteous cloud of emotional justification, thus making way for his sins against others.

We may not openly admit it, but often, like King David, we excuse our sinful behavior. We may reason, "I'm not hurting anyone." Or, "Everyone else does it." Or our emotions override our reason and we just want what isn't ours. Nathan could have said to David, "What is it about 'she doesn't belong to you' that you didn't understand?" God is very patient with us, but we must realize that when we transgress against God's Word our sin has far reaching implications. Sin against God separates us from Him and from all who are part of His kingdom. What are the "little" sins that you excuse? What would the prophet Nathan say to you about it?

Thursday of 1 Lent March 14, 2019

*Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me,
and I shall be whiter than snow. —Psalm 51:7*

Why hyssop? Hyssop is an herb, a species of marjoram and member of the mint family. It does have the advantage of long stems, sometimes three to four feet long! This makes the herb good for waving, and the clusters at the tips of the branches can collect liquid efficiently for sprinkling. But why hyssop?

In Exodus 12:22, as protection for the Israelites from the tenth plague in Egypt, Moses was instructed by God to "Take a bunch of hyssop and dip it in the blood which is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood..." When God saw the blood He "passed over" those homes and spared Israel. Was it the hyssop or the blood that was important?

Many years ago I was asked by a parishioner to bless her home. While discussing the process of sprinkling the rooms with holy water, she asked, "Why don't you use hyssop?" We pulled out a concordance and looked at the various Bible passages regarding the herb. Our conclusion was that hyssop was the aspergillum (i.e. sprinkler) of the Old Testament. It wasn't the sprinkler that was important, but the blood that was sprinkled. Nevertheless, she found some hyssop at a nursery and I used it to sprinkle her home.

We can get obsessed with the means and miss the ends. For example, when Fr. Finley and I began doing accountability together, he lived in Idaho. We wanted to be able to conclude our accountability sessions with confession, but the traditional practice of priestly confession dictated that priest and penitent were supposed to be in the same room. Could we do this over the phone? We asked our respective bishops and were given permission to hear each other's confession via telephone. It was not the means, but the sacramental grace that was important. God can use whatever means available to grant us His grace.

Friday of 1 Lent
March 15, 2019

*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from thy presence, and take not thy holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of thy salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.
—Psalm 51:10-12*

I can't do it! I can't turn my life around. My will is not big enough. My ability to change my circumstances, my heart, my spirit, is limited at best. Only God has the power to change my life, to cleanse me from my sin, and to "create in me a clean heart." Only God can make me new!

David had been laid low by the prophet Nathan's word, but before he could experience the full restoration of joy in his life he needed to come to the place of complete surrender to God. While separated from God the fruit of the Spirit was not available to him. The love, the peace, the joy of the Lord are found in the Lord alone. Because of David's self-induced alienation from God, the fruit was not in him nor available to him.

The words of verses 10-12 quoted above form the heart of a radical prayer. The assertion that King David is making, and that we make when we join him in his prayer of repentance, is that we are asking God to take away our spirit and "put a new and right spirit within [us]." The spirit within us is the very nature of our being. We are asking God to completely transform our being, taking away what we are and remaking us in Him, in His image. David is saying, "Don't let me be the person I was anymore. Make me the person you want me to be."

In his song, "A Heart Like Yours," John Barnett reiterates David's petition: "Create in me a humble heart, An innocent and childlike heart" ... "Give me a heart like yours." May that be our cry to God. Pray that God may give us the will to beg for a new spirit and a humble, childlike heart; that we may begin anew, start over, become babes in the Spirit, dwelling in His love, peace, and joy.

Saturday of 1 Lent
March 16, 2019

*O Lord, open thou my lips, and my mouth shall show forth thy praise.
—Psalm 51:15*

As we come toward the end of King David's heartfelt prayer of repentance, the light of God's love begins to penetrate David's darkened heart. The joy of the Lord is quickly being restored to him. God wanted David back. He was not interested in making the king wallow in self-recrimination and shame. God wanted His wayward one restored to full relationship. God was desirous of seeing His servant King David once again filled with the joy of the Lord. He quickly forgave; David quickly responded; and the relationship was quickly restored.

In the depth of his spirit, David realized that without God he was not able to please God. Even his songs, the psalms he loved to compose on the harp and sing to the Lord, found their genesis in God. And so, in the verses we see above, David prays to the Lord to "open thou my lips." For without God's blessing and His presence in the psalmist's life, the words, the music, the praise of the Lord Himself was unable to pour forth. "But," David believes and declares, "if You Lord will open my lips, my mouth shall show forth Your praise."

In the collect for Proper 19, the Sunday closest to September 14, we pray, "O God, because without you we are not able to please you, mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts..." But do we truly believe we are not able to please God without Him? If so, do we act upon that belief? David was a man after God's own heart because he both believed God and acted accordingly. He knew he couldn't please God without that intimacy of relationship with Him. That is why his prayer of Psalm 51 was both real and received. God knew the king's heart and answered. He opened David's lips, and the psalmist's mouth poured forth praise.

The Second Week of Lent: Manasseh's Repentance Sunday, March 17, 2019

Read 2 Chronicles 33

And when he was in distress he entreated the favor of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. He prayed to him, and God received his entreaty and heard his supplication and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord was God. (v. 12-13)

The Lord called Manasseh to repentance by bringing upon Judah the army of Assyria. Manasseh was taken prisoner to Babylon, and there, he awakened to his need for repentance. He prayed to God, and God answered his cry for mercy. The Chronicler does not give us the prayer, but notes that “his prayer to his God, and the words of the seers who spoke to him in the name of the Lord...are in the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel” (2 Chron. 33:18). A copy of his prayer is found in the Apocrypha as a separate book, “The Prayer of Manasseh.”

Manasseh was the longest reigning monarch of either Israel or Judah. But that might not have been true without his heartfelt repentance before God. Manasseh “did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the abominable practices of the nations... [and] seduced Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that they did more evil than the nations...” (2 Chron. 33:2,9). Nevertheless, the Lord sought out the king, calling him to repent, and when Manasseh answered, he “knew that the Lord was God” (33:13).

St. John Chrysostom describes the situation this way: “Manasseh...having become more ungodly than all who were before him, when he afterwards repented was ranked among the friends of God. Now if, looking to the magnitude of his own iniquities, he had despaired of restoration and repentance, he would have missed all that he afterwards obtained; but as it was, looking to the boundlessness of God's tender mercy instead of the enormity of his transgressions, and having broken in two the bonds of the devil, he rose up and contended with him and finished the good course.” If there was hope for Manasseh, what about for us?

Monday of 2 Lent March 18, 2019

Read The Prayer of Manasseh

*It can be found in the Apocrypha — see this link: <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Prayer%20of%20Manasseh+1&version=RSV>
Or you can read Canticle 14 in the Book of Common Prayer, p. 90*

But your merciful promise is beyond all measure; it surpasses all that our minds can fathom. O Lord, you are full of compassion, long-suffering, and abounding in mercy. (vv. 6-7)

Miranda once told a story about her two roommates. The first was an unbeliever, the second a worshiper. One Sunday afternoon after attending church the believer arrived home to be confronted by the other with the question, “So, how was God today?” The believing roommate didn't miss a beat: “He was omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent as always.” Our God is ALWAYS all-knowing, all-powerful, and ever-present. He is also ever-merciful.

In the first five verses of Manasseh's prayer, the king recites evidence of God's power. And then Manasseh inserts the “But” we see in the verse above. The RSV reads, “yet immeasurable and unsearchable is thy promised mercy.” It is a Hebrew practice to recite the actions and attributes of God in their prayers. This practice is a means to remind ourselves and those around us of who God is, and what He can do. Manasseh is reminding himself that though he has committed horrendous apostasy, the Lord Has promised repentance and forgiveness, for the Lord is “full of compassion, long-suffering, and abounding in mercy.” The RSV adds, “in the multitude of thy mercies thou hast appointed repentance for sinners, that they may be saved.” The king recognized that the Lord Almighty is his only hope for salvation.

The gift of repentance was offered to King Manasseh through some severe and trying circumstances. And the king, in a moment of humility and clarity, recognized the invitation. He knew God was THE omnipotent God, and he stood fast on the promise that God was also all-merciful. Our God is always abounding in mercy.

Tuesday of 2 Lent March 19, 2019

For the sins I have committed are more in number than the sand of the sea; my transgressions are multiplied, O Lord, they are multiplied! I am unworthy to look up and see the height of heaven because of the multitude of my iniquities. I am weighted down with many an iron fetter, so that I am rejected because of my sins, and I have no relief; for I have provoked thy wrath and have done what is evil in thy sight, setting up abominations and multiplying offenses. (vv. 9-10)

One gets the feeling that Manasseh was feeling the heavy burden of sins committed over a long period of time, without the benefit of conviction and repentance. What the king is offering here is the first step in true repentance: acknowledgement of wrongdoing. What he is telling God is not news to the Most High—the all-knowing One. God knows (cf. Psalm 44:21). And it is God’s conviction of sin which brings about this act of repentance.

Before we can truly repent, before we can confess our sins, we must acknowledge that we have sinned. God may convict us by making us aware that we have sinned against another, or against God alone, but we must come into agreement with Him. We must acknowledge that, yes, what we have done is sinful. That may seem obvious, but far too often we rationalize away our thoughts, words, and deeds, and make excuses for why what we have done is not sinful in this circumstance, or we reason “it’s not that bad.”

Manasseh had been king for many years, and he was doing what the nations around them were doing. And he encouraged others in the kingdom to do so as well. How could it be wrong if everyone else is doing it? We often reason that God wouldn’t want us to stand out, be different. How often do we justify behavior because we are afraid of rejection, or judgment from others?

But let us not wait, as Manasseh did, until we “are weighted down with many an iron fetter,” but when God’s conviction comes, let us quickly agree with Him and accept His gift of repentance. Has God shown you a sin that you are not acknowledging? Now is the time to come into agreement with Him.

Wednesday of 2 Lent March 20, 2019

And now I bend the knee of my heart, and make my appeal, sure of your gracious goodness. (v. 11)

The only way I can keep going, as sinful as I am, is confidence in God’s “gracious goodness.” St. Paul describes grace as “the free gift” (Romans 5:15). And he goes on to say, a few verses later, “but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (v. 20). What this means for all of us is that we don’t have to earn God’s goodness—it is a free gift. And He is good all the time!

In 1772, the Anglican clergyman John Newton wrote a poem as an illustration for his New Year’s day sermon. He was trying to convey to his congregation the freedom found in repentance, and the abundance of God’s “Amazing Grace”. He grew up without any particular religious conviction, and he lived a profligate life. British authorities conscripted him into service in the Royal Navy, and later, after leaving the service, he became involved in the Atlantic slave trade. In 1748, a violent storm battered his vessel so severely that he called out to God for mercy. This was the moment that he marked as his spiritual conversion. The poem he wrote for his 1773 New Year’s Day sermon became the best known Christian song of all time. It is a hymn to God’s gracious goodness.

We can’t earn God’s goodness. We don’t deserve it. But we can be assured that when we bend the knee of our hearts, and make our appeal, God will pour forth His gracious goodness. He did for John Newton, such that he broke forth in words of praise. May we make the words of his poem our own.

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.

Thursday of 2 Lent
March 21, 2019

I earnestly beseech thee, forgive me, O Lord, forgive me! Do not destroy me with my transgressions! Do not be angry with me for ever or lay up evil for me; do not condemn me to the depths of the earth. For thou, O Lord, art the God of those who repent... (v. 13)

“For thou, O Lord, art the God of those who repent.” He is God of all, so what is the meaning of this phrase in this prayer? There is a simple dichotomy here: either we acknowledge God for who He is and humble ourselves before Him, or we refuse His gift of repentance and stand in the place of God in pride. He is the God of those who repent, because the penitent know they need Him.

In a previous denomination I had a bishop who would repeatedly use the phrase, “The God I know...” He would inevitably utter these words just before he would justify some sinful behavior that he was discounting as sin. For example: “The God I know wouldn’t condemn a homosexual to a life without sex.” Or, “The God I know would not make a woman carry a baby she didn’t want.” Ultimately, when confronted, this man actually said, “I don’t believe in sin. A loving God would not condemn any of His children to hell.”

In 1957, Billy Graham wrote a book entitled, “The Sin of Tolerance.” He says, “Tolerance, in one sense, implies the compromise of one’s convictions, a yielding of ground upon important issues. Hence, over-tolerance in moral issues has made us soft, flabby and devoid of conviction... We have become tolerant about immorality... we have become tolerant about godlessness... [Jesus] was tolerant toward the sinner but intolerant toward the evil which enslaved him.”

The God of those who repent is tolerant toward us, but He convicts the sin within us because He loves us and wants us to be reconciled with Him. Will we justify our behavior before “the God I know”, or humble ourselves before the God of those who repent?

Friday of 2 Lent
March 22, 2019

...in me thou wilt manifest thy goodness; for, unworthy as I am, thou wilt save me in thy great mercy, (v. 14)

In high school I was not the poster child for clean living. As a result, many years later I was concerned that my reputation might make it difficult for me to return to Dallas as a priest. Would anyone remember what I was like and would that negatively affect my ministry? When I started service in my first parish, I was pleased that I knew no one in the congregation. Then after a year I moved. Again, in this new parish no one there knew me. But, after a few months, one Sunday I scanned the congregation and there was a familiar face. I had known Gail in high school. And more to the point she knew me. After service, as I greeted people at the door, Gail stepped up, shook my hand and smiled. As she held my hand she said, “It is really good to see you, Bill. If God can make you a priest, there is hope for all of us.”

“In me you will show forth your goodness,” Manasseh prays. He knows that if God can be merciful to him, a notoriously evil sinner, then there is hope for everyone. Sometimes we hear that someone can’t believe in a God who allows all the pain and evil in the world. But that is not the measure of God’s goodness. We inhabit a fallen world, and there is evil in the world. There are temptations all of us must face. And we fall. We sin. But God is great in mercy, and He makes his goodness known in showing mercy.

We cannot know God’s plan for mankind. We cannot know why He does the things He does and the way He does them. But we can both know and experience His goodness and mercy. And when we are open to Him, and humbly seek Him, as my friend Gail did, we can see His goodness made manifest even in a notorious sinner. Gail was right. If God could make me a priest, and restore the most evil of Judean kings, then surely His mercy is great, and His goodness is available to everyone.

Saturday of 2 Lent March 23, 2019

I will praise thee continually all the days of my life. For all the host of heaven sings thy praise, and thine is the glory for ever. Amen. (v. 15)

College was a particularly difficult time for me. But by God's grace I had a foundation in Him. I wasn't always walking in His ways, and I was far too quick to yield to temptation, but as the Word promises, "He will never leave you, nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). In my darkest times, and there were many, God would send little reminders to me that He was there. And when He seemed most absent, I would turn to the Word or to the liturgy and His light would shatter the darkness.

Manasseh ends his prayer crying out, "I will praise thee continually all the days of my life." The practice of praise is a powerful tool. Let me give you two examples from my dark college days. In my first year I was cash strapped and living in the Hispanic barrio of Houston. It was a dangerous place. One night my car broke down about a mile from my apartment and I had to walk home. I began to sing the 23rd Psalm: "...Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, thou art with me..." And He was, and the fear was lifted. Two years later I had moved back to Dallas and began attending a brand new university. It was so new they hadn't finished all of the classrooms, so some of my classes met in the building's entryway. One night (I took night classes because of work), I was waiting in the hall for the professor to show up, and I was NOT happy. But I began to sing the *Sursum Corda*: "It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty." And as I lifted my voice in praise and thanksgiving all of my problems began to fade in His light.

Manasseh discovered through the gift of repentance what relationship with the Almighty can bring. And he sang praises to God. Can you praise God in the midst of life's trials? Try it!

The Third Week of Lent: Daniel's Repentance Sunday, March 24, 2019

Read Daniel chapter 9

I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and supplications with fasting and sackcloth and ashes.

I prayed to the Lord my God and made confession... (vv. 3-4)

In his song, "Let Us Pray", Steven Curtis Chapman says:

And you ask if I'll be praying for you please

And in keeping with convention

I'll say yes with good intentions

To pray later making mention of your needs

How often do we, when asked to pray for someone, offer a vague, careless, "God, please bless them" sort of prayer and return to address our own concerns. But when confronted with the fact that the Holy City lay in ruins, and his people were living in exile far from home, Daniel prayed for those who pleaded for God's mercy. He "turned his face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and supplications with fasting and sackcloth and ashes." This was not some careless, unthinking prayer. Daniel stood in the gap and interceded for his entire nation. And he confessed the sins of the people before the Lord.

Daniel knew that he was powerless to change the situation, even though he was strategically placed in the palace of the king. He recognized that only the God of heaven was capable of returning the exiles and rebuilding Jerusalem. But he also knew that their current circumstances were due to their sins, and only true contrition, confession, and repentance would suffice. Daniel prayed to the Lord and made confession on behalf of Israel.

As liturgical Christians we practice spiritual discipline with rites and ceremonies. As a Jew, Daniel exercised the prayer disciplines familiar to him. He made his prayer "with fasting and sackcloth and ashes." During Lent, let us follow Daniel's example and pray for our nation, standing in the gap, with the liturgical discipline of prayer and fasting. And let us confess the sins of our nation.

Monday of 3 Lent March 25, 2019

we have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from thy commandments and ordinances; we have not listened to thy servants the prophets, who spoke in thy name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land. —Daniel 9:5-6

It is distressing for me to hear people say, “Donald Trump is not *MY* president.” Or during the last presidency, I heard, “Barak Obama is not *MY* president.” The rational conclusion to either of these statements is, “then you are not an American, because that man is the President of the United States.” It is a common practice to distance ourselves from things we find offensive. And that makes sense. It is an inbred defense mechanism. It keeps us safe from what we consider potentially harmful. But we are Americans. We have a democratic government. We are all part of the problem, and we can all be part of the solution. As Christians seeking solutions to the problems facing our country, we can follow the example of Daniel and confess “we have sinned and done wrong.”

The reason Daniel was in exile with the nation of Israel was that Israel had turned its back on the covenant they had made with God. They had “sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly,” and suffered the consequences of broken covenant relationship. And in like manner, as Americans, there is simply no doubt that we as a nation have “turned aside from God’s commandments and ordinances.” There is widespread violence, immorality, substance abuse, and godlessness throughout this land. Should we be surprised that in turning our back on God’s Word He has allowed us to descend into such a deep pit of despair? What to do?

Daniel heard God’s invitation to repent. Accepting that gift, he turned his face toward the Lord and confessed. Daniel was a righteous man. He had kept covenant. Nevertheless, he was a man of the nation and accepted his corporate identity and responsibility. We may believe we are blameless for our nation’s woes, but we are Americans. We have a common identity *and* responsibility.

Tuesday of 3 Lent March 26, 2019

To Thee, O Lord, belongs righteousness... —Daniel 9:7

Righteousness can be defined as “right relationship.” If I am in right relationship with God, with my church, with my brothers and sisters in Christ, then I am walking in righteousness with each. When Daniel prays, “To Thee, O Lord, belongs righteousness...” he is saying that God has always been in right relationship with Israel. The problem has never been God’s, it is Israel’s readiness to break covenant. For God to be truly righteous He must fulfill the entirety of His covenant relationship. He rewards the righteous, but He must also punish the wicked. Daniel recognizes this truth and he accepts the responsibility that the people bear in their faithlessness toward God. God was right to punish their wickedness and send them into exile where they could receive the gift of repentance. But He also promised mercy and forgiveness.

One of the priests who formerly served this parish used to say, “It causes me to shudder to think that we serve a just God.” What he meant is, as a nation, we have strayed far from God’s covenant and His commandments. The Church no longer walks in faithfulness to the Word, and that should cause us to shudder. For if God is truly just and righteous, we deserve a punishment like that which Israel endured at the time Daniel was writing and praying.

We want justice when someone wrongs us, and are disgruntled at the least when justice is not done. But, when we are punished by God, we are quick to cry foul. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, quoting Proverbs 3, says, “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor lose courage when you are punished by him. For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives” (12:5-6). Our God is a just God.

Is there a punishment or a correction that God has given that you have rejected? He is righteous, and He disciplines those He loves.

Wednesday of 3 Lent
March 27, 2019

...but to us confusion of face, as at this day, to the men of Judah, to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to all Israel..., because of the treachery which they have committed against thee. To us, O Lord, belongs confusion of face..., because we have sinned against thee. —Daniel 9:7-8

To God belongs righteousness, “but to us confusion of face.” We tend to spend a lot of time confused. When we are not in right relationship with God, then we have severed that channel of wisdom and discernment available to those who walk in His way. Often when things don’t seem right we begin to look for the cause, and we tend to start by looking outside of ourselves. If things aren’t as we would expect them to be, or as we would like them to be, why are we looking outside ourselves for the source of the problems? Daniel says Israel’s predicament is “...because of the treachery which they have committed against thee...because we have sinned against thee.”

When someone tells me that things seem out of sorts in their family, the parish, the community, I ask them, “Have you prayed about that and asked God what He would have you do?” And if we are sincere in our searching prayer, and God reveals that the problem may be within us and our relationship with Him, are we open to receive that revelation? Are we willing to humble ourselves and confess our sin in order to restore right relationship with God? When we do, the things that so recently seemed out of sorts begin to come into right alignment. It was our perception that was misaligned—we were suffering “confusion of face.” It was our relationship with God that was out of order. We couldn’t see Him and His guiding hand clearly. Through the gift of repentance, though, a right relationship can be restored.

Are there things that seem out of order in your life? Look to the Lord and ask Him to restore you to a right relationship with Him.

Thursday of 3 Lent
March 28, 2019

As it is written in the law of Moses, all this calamity has come upon us, yet we have not entreated the favor of the Lord our God, turning from our iniquities and giving heed to thy truth. —Daniel 9:13

“As it is written...” Daniel spent quality time in the Word. He knew Jeremiah had prophesied this exile. He knew the promises made in the Torah and Writings. And here, he entreats God’s favor, through repentance, recognizing that Moses had warned that this calamity would fall on those who were unfaithful to God’s covenant. Daniel knew the Word, but the people of Israel had not “given heed to thy truth.”

The Word written in the law of Moses was clear: “if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command you this day, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you” (Deut. 18:15). Daniel knew that if the residents of Judah had been people of the Word and had been obedient to God’s covenant, this calamity would not have fallen upon them. As St. Peter reminds us, “we have the prophetic word made more sure. You will do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place...” (2 Peter 1:19).

But are we paying attention to the written Word? Are we obeying the commands, heeding the warnings, embracing the Truth? As was noted in Tuesday’s meditation the Church has strayed away from faithfulness to the Word of God. There is faint distinction between those who live according to the ways of the world and those who claim membership in the Body of Christ.

Daniel entreated favor from the Lord by confessing the iniquity of his people. He gave heed to the truth, even the uncomfortable truth of God’s righteous judgment. He trusted the written Word to be a reliable source of God promises. And God hearkened to his prayer. As Peter said, God’s Word is sure. Are you spending time in the Word? Renew your commitment this Lent to daily Bible reading.

Friday of 3 Lent March 29, 2019

Now therefore, O our God, hearken to the prayer of thy servant and to his supplications, and for thy own sake, O Lord, cause thy face to shine upon thy sanctuary, which is desolate. —Daniel 9:17

On a visit to our parish many years ago, Bishop Peter Zedekiah Otsulah Chunge of the diocese Great Lakes East, Kenya told the story of how he was praying for a woman for healing. It was a difficult case, and it didn't look good for the woman. Bishop Chunge said that he looked up to heaven and said to God, "Lord, you need to heal her, because you are going to look bad if she is not healed." This is essentially the same prayer Daniel prayed on behalf of Jerusalem. "For *thy own sake*, O Lord, cause thy face to shine..." Daniel was essentially telling God that He was going to look bad if His Temple was allowed to remain desolate.

God is not worried about His reputation, however, He does want us to recognize that whatever we do reflects on Him. We are called by His Name. We are Christians. We are those who are "in Christ." The world is watching. The world wants to see who we are and what we do "in Christ." When we behave in a Christlike manner, it reflects well on our Lord. When we fall short of the mark and live as the world lives, the world finds it easy to dismiss the God we worship.

Daniel prayed that the Jews might be forgiven for their trespasses against the law and covenant. The enemies of Israel could see no reason to hold the worship of the Jews, or their temple, in high regard, because the Jews themselves did not do that either. But, Daniel prayed, if God will forgive those who repent, showing forth His great mercy, and allow them to return to Jerusalem to rebuild His Temple, then for His sake, His face would shine upon that Holy Land and His Holy Temple. The world would then see and know that God is in His sanctuary.

Saturday of 3 Lent March 30, 2019

...for we do not present our supplications before thee on the ground of our righteousness, but on the ground of thy great mercy. O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, give heed and act; delay not, for thy own sake, O my God, because thy city and thy people are called by thy name. —Daniel 9:18-19

My nephew, David, is adopted. My sister was unable to conceive because of a medical issue. She and her husband decided to adopt. Going through Catholic Social Services, they found an 11 month old boy of Puerto Rican descent who the services were having a hard time placing. My brother-in-law is also of Puerto Rican descent, so they gladly received him as their son. David became a Gonzalez on the day of his adoption. He took his father's name, and all of the rights of inheritance that belong with that.

In his prayer, Daniel asks God to "give heed and act; delay not, for thy own sake...because thy city and thy people are **called by thy Name**" (*emphasis added*). God has put His Name upon His people, and upon His Holy City and His Temple. He has become their Father, and the people who are called by His Name have become inheritors of His Kingdom. St. Paul tells the Galatians that "God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir" (Gal. 4:4-7).

We end this week the way we began "not presenting our supplications before thee on the ground of our righteousness, but on the ground of thy great mercy." And now, because of the promise of adoption, we can pray to God as His children crying "Abba! Father!" He is our Abba. He is our Daddy. And as Jesus reminds us, "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:13) We are "people called by thy name." Do not be afraid to come to Him.

The Fourth Week of Lent: Nehemiah's Repentance Sunday, March 31, 2019

Read Nehemiah 1:4-11

As we saw last week, Daniel was in exile in Susa, the capital of Babylonia (Daniel 8:2). A large portion of the Old Testament deals with the Babylonian captivity of the Jews and their sinful behavior which led to that exile. The Book of Esther takes place in Susa (2:3-8). The two books of Chronicles record the faithlessness of Judah and the events leading to exile. And 2 Chronicles ends with the promise of the restoration of Jerusalem. Nehemiah was serving the king in Susa (Neh. 1:1), and Ezra worked closely with Nehemiah and the returnees in Jerusalem. Ezekiel prophesied during the captivity, and the prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi all prophesied during the time Nehemiah oversaw the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. That is a substantive part of the narrative and teaching of the Old Covenant. Why? There is a message there. God wants His people to walk in covenant with Him. And when they stray, He gives them the gift of repentance that they may be restored to intimate relationship with Him.

Daniel prayed earnestly for God to show His mercy to the exiles in Babylon and allow them to return to Jerusalem. Nehemiah and Ezra then take up the story of the return of the exiles and deal with the process of reconciliation with God and restoration of relationship with Him. Both men recognized that a key ingredient in the exiles' repentance is amendment of life. Both men pray for God's mercy on the nation, and ask for His patience as the people amend their ways, and learn again how to walk in His paths.

Nehemiah received his commission to go to Jerusalem after repenting on behalf of the nation Judah. He says, "I sat down and wept, and mourned for days; and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven" (vs. 4). God heard, and responded. He gave the gift of repentance. King Artaxerxes released the exiles and made Nehemiah governor of Judah and Jerusalem.

Monday of 4 Lent April 1, 2019

God who keeps covenant and steadfast love—Nehemiah 1:5

Nehemiah and the exiles are mired in servitude to a heathen king and his non-believing subjects. After mourning for days and fasting and praying before the God of heaven, Nehemiah recognized that the problem was not an outside force working against them. This was a problem of their own making. They had sinned. They had separated themselves from God and His gracious covenant with them. They alone were at fault for their unpleasant circumstances. It was time to own their responsibility for what had happened. They needed to change their ways so that they would not again fall into the patterns of behavior that led them into sin.

Covenant always begins with God's love and mercy. We can trust Him to reveal what needs transformation in ourselves to bring us back into right relationship and fidelity to covenant. And once we are on the return path to God, we need to work at amendment of life. But there is one who is the enemy of God and all those who worship Him. This fallen angel does NOT want us to return to right relationship with the Almighty. When we were walking in rebellion and broken relationship with God, we belonged to the devil. And now the Lord has reclaimed us. To the devil we are lost property, and he will not give us up easily. He will do what he can to thwart us and steal us back. This is what the exiles experienced.

The process of returning to the Promised Land was not simply a physical relocation. The exiles had spent 70 years in a heathen environment, and prior to their exile they had not been living in covenant. There was much that needed to be unlearned, and a way of life that needed to be relearned. That is what all of us must do when we repent and return to the Lord: amend our lives. When we acknowledge our sin, express true sorrow, confess, and turn around, we make a new start. But we need to amend our behavior so that we are not tempted to return to our sinful ways.

Tuesday of 4 Lent April 2, 2019

Read Ezra chapter 9

Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the faithlessness of the returned exiles, gathered round me while I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice. And at the evening sacrifice I rose from my fasting, with my garments and my mantle rent, and fell upon my knees and spread out my hands to the Lord my God... —Ezra 9:4-5

Ezra tells us that he was distressed because the people were returning to the ways of the world that had brought upon them the judgment of God and their exile. They had not amended their lives. After arriving back in Jerusalem the officials approached Ezra and said, “The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations...” Ezra responded to this news, saying, “because of the faithlessness of the returned exiles...at the evening sacrifice I rose from my fasting, with my garments and my mantle rent, and fell upon my knees and spread out my hands to the Lord my God...” (9:1,4-5).

True amendment of life is not an easy task, and is not something we can do without the grace of the Holy Spirit. God has given us free will, and we must want to change. St. Paul describes this holy desire in Romans 12:2. He says, “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Amendment of life requires a good measure of humility. To amend one’s life means humbly admitting that the way we were living was spiritually unhealthy. It is like the time I was having heart palpitations. The doctor asked how many cups of coffee I drank every day. I lied. He knew it. But in order to stay heart healthy I had to amend my life — and drink less coffee. The stakes were higher for the Jews and Ezra. They needed a total transformation. What needs amendment in your life? Will you humbly seek God?

Wednesday of 4 Lent April 3, 2019

God has punished us less than our iniquities deserved. —Ezra 9:13

When I was in high school, the youth sponsor at our church was a cop. He invited me to do a “ride along” with him one evening as he did his routine patrol. That evening he was following a truck and the man was speeding. So Ron pulled him over and talked to him. The man explained that he was simply not paying attention and hadn’t noticed that the speed limit had dropped. Ron said he understood and encouraged the man to be more careful. The trucker asked, “Are you going to give me a ticket?” Ron said, “What would you do in my shoes?” The man said, “Well, I was speeding.” They talked back and forth for a minute, and it was obvious to me that Ron wanted to let him go with a warning. But the man couldn’t believe he would do that. Finally, he looked Ron in the eyes and said, “I don’t deserve that.”

Sometimes it is hard for us to accept the grace and mercy of God. Ezra clearly states in the verse above that God is not interested in giving us what we have merited by our sinfulness. He says that God has “punished us less than our iniquities deserved.” But that is the way of our God. That is grace—the free gift of God.

God had given the Jews a second chance, something they did not deserve. Ezra and Nehemiah had been entrusted with bringing the exiles back—back not only to the land, but back to the Lord. As the priest, Ezra’s burden was to facilitate restoration of covenantal relationship between God and His people. He knew that unless they returned to fidelity to the Word that would not be possible. Ezra cries out to God, appealing to Him to be patient. He had punished them less than they deserved. Ezra asks God to extend that grace to help them amend their lives. And God heard.

Examine your life. How often has God not punished you as you deserved? Give thanks. And ask God to help you amend your life.

Thursday of 4 Lent April 4, 2019

Shall we break the commandment again? —Ezra 9:14

One of the hardest parts about amendment of life is that we have developed many ingrained behaviors. We know that these behaviors and actions are not healthy, but it is hard to break old habits. And, of course, there is the problem that, from time to time, we can find ourselves doing the same thing over and over again expecting different results. Yes, that is the definition of insanity, but are we not all occasionally guilty of insanity?

Ezra is basically accusing the returning Jews of being insane. They are going back to the same patterns of behavior that got them in trouble in the first place. They are doing the same things over again, expecting different results. He asks, “Shall we break the commandment again?” God has shown them extraordinary mercy. And how do the Jews give thanks for that gracious gift? They intermarry with the heathen people of the surrounding nations, separating themselves from the covenant community. They abandon the ways of God and embrace the ways of the world.

Doing it God’s way, not the way of the world, can be difficult. For example, reconciling with those who have hurt us or offended us is not always easy, but it is necessary in order to maintain unity of the spirit in the bond of peace within Christ’s Body (Eph. 4:1-3). A thorough discussion of God’s way of reconciliation with others is a topic larger than we can cover in these meditations. But it is important for us to recognize that following the biblical guidelines, not our own wishes and desires, is essential to amending our lives and returning to God’s covenant. It is not only important for unity of the Church, it is part of our witness to the world. For Jesus said, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). And Jesus prayed to the Father that “they may all be one...that the world may believe that You have sent me” (John 17:21). Let’s do it God’s way.

Friday of 4 Lent April 5, 2019

But if you return to me, and keep my commandments and do them, ...I will bring them to the place which I have chosen... —Nehemiah 1:9

When Miranda and I were in Israel, our guide continually struggled to keep us on schedule. On one occasion, as we assembled back on the bus, we counted off and there was one person missing. I could see that the guide was getting perturbed. He had given us a deadline to be back and this person was holding up the entire group. He explained that we were on a tight schedule and that we would miss some sights if we all didn’t adhere to the schedule. One person’s selfish act had a negative effect on the whole group.

You need to be on the bus when it is time to leave in order to get to the next stop. Nehemiah quotes God’s edict to Moses, saying, “if you return to me, and keep my commandments and do them...I will bring them to the place which I have chosen...” And so the governor prays for the people that they would return to God and He would “bring them to the place which He had chosen for them.” Nehemiah saw that the people were being selfish. They were building their own homes, but leaving the Temple and the walls unbuilt. They were not all getting on the bus.

St. Paul tells us that “we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (Romans 12:5). What we do as a Christian affects the whole Body of Christ. If we are walking in the way of Jesus, we build up the Body. If we are mired in selfishness and sin, we weaken the Body. God gives us the gift of repentance that we may be restored to right relationship with Him and with one another, and build one another up in the Lord.

Ask the Lord to show you when you have put yourself and your desires ahead of the needs of the Body. Then, ask God for the grace to change your heart, that you may amend your ways.

**Saturday of 4 Lent
April 6, 2019**

O Lord, let thy ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants who delight to fear thy name; and give success to thy servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. —Nehemiah 1:11

Malcolm Muggeridge was making a documentary of Mother Teresa and her work. As he followed her through the streets of Calcutta, she stopped at a trash can, reached in and pulled a baby from the garbage. She held the child close and cried, “She is alive!” Muggeridge asked, “Are you going to save every baby in all Calcutta? How can you be successful in the face of such poverty?” Mother Teresa replied, “God did not call me to be successful. He called me to be faithful.”

Though Nehemiah prays that he might be granted success “in the sight of this man”—the man being King Artaxerxes—his desire is that he and the people of Israel might be found faithful in the sight of God. Nehemiah knew that it was only by walking in covenant, in intimate relationship with God, that they would find success and restoration to the Holy City. And so he humbled himself before God. He repented of his own sins and confessed the sins of his nation, God’s own people. He sought God’s heart, and allowed his own heart to be broken with the things that broke the heart of God.

In our competitive culture, it is easy to equate success with triumph over an opponent. But in the spiritual life success is often measured in being the least, the overlooked, and the humble. Jesus said, “If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35). In worldly terms being last does not equate with success. But in God’s economy, the “servant of all” is the one who is first, putting God’s will ahead of his or her own.

When have you allowed pride to press you to be number one at the expense of those around you? Have you ever put personal success ahead of the success of the Body? Ask God for His redeeming grace, and the humility to put others’ needs ahead of your own.

**The Fifth Week of Lent: Peter’s Repentance
Sunday, April 7, 2019**

Read John 21:15-19

It is interesting to see Peter’s three denials in John 18 juxtaposed with his three penitent affirmations in chapter 21. Jesus is offering Peter the opportunity to turn around, to experience mercy and amendment of life. Jesus wants to restore their relationship, something Peter can do by expressing his love. At the same time, Jesus is asking Peter to refocus outwardly, to let their relationship exist not for Peter alone, but for Christ’s flock. Let’s take a look:

First denial: A maid asks Peter if he is a disciple. He said, “I am not” (18:17). First affirmation: “‘Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ He said to him, ‘Feed my lambs’” (21:15).

Second denial: In the courtyard Peter is asked again if he is a disciple. He said, “I am not” (18:25). Second affirmation: “A second time [Jesus] said to him, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ He said to him, ‘Tend my sheep’” (21:16).

Third denial: An eyewitness says, “Did I not see you in the garden with him?” Peter again denied it (18:26-27). Third affirmation: “[Jesus] said to him the third time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ And he said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep’” (21:17).

What John has presented to us is not a formal prayer of repentance as we have seen the previous weeks. What we have here is Peter’s humble interaction with Jesus which ultimately results in the Lord granting to him the gift of repentance. This interaction between Jesus and Peter leads to his changed life. He is moved from being a frightened spectator to becoming the Lord’s profound witness on the Day of Pentecost. Let us join Peter in interacting with Jesus, and seek restoration of our relationship with Him.

Monday of 5 Lent April 8, 2019

Do you love me more than these? —John 21:15

In the verse above, Jesus is reaching out to Peter, across the divide that the disciple created when he denied our Lord. He is telling Peter that the relationship that they have was based in mutual love and can only be restored when Peter turns around and again abides in His love. He reminds Peter in this simple question that the things He promised to all of the disciples the night of His betrayal are still available to those who are penitent. He said, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love...” (John 15:10). It is an invitation to relationship. He is offering Peter the gift of repentance. “Take your eyes off of this world and look to Me!”

The Rule of St. Benedict begins and ends, and is shot through, with exhortation to make Christ the focus of our every act, our every thought. Benedict says that among the “tools” that we as Christians use in our spiritual walk, “Your way of acting should be different from the world’s way; the love of Christ must come before all else” (RB 4:20-21). And in the last instructional chapter he exhorts us to “good zeal”, saying, “Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ...” (RB 72:11).

During my last sabbatical I was confronted in very much the same way as was Peter. I was praying, and expressing my concern for the members of this parish. And as I prayed the Lord asked me, “Do you love these more than Me?” It brought me up short, and I had to answer honestly, “Yes, Lord, I think I do.” After confessing my sin of putting another (many others) ahead of my love for Him, He began to show me that I can best love my wife, my son, my parishioners, and anyone else by loving Christ above all. For if I am in Christ Jesus, then I am “abiding” in His love. Only then can I love those around me with Christ’s love.

Is there anyone or anything that you have “preferred” to Christ?

Tuesday of 5 Lent April 9, 2019

Feed my lambs...Tend my sheep...Feed my sheep —John 21:15,16,17

Jesus’ response to each of Peter’s affirmations was a command to take care of the flock of Christ. It was a challenge to the disciple (one who follows) to become an apostle (one who is sent to serve), to look outside of himself and his desires, to focus on others, to feed the sheep. What was the measure of Peter’s love for Christ? Jesus gave him the measuring rod of that love: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). “If a man loves me, he will keep my word...” (14:23). “If you love Me, Peter,” Jesus was saying, “you will do what I command: Feed my sheep.”

Many years ago, I had a parishioner ask me, “Am I going to go to heaven?” It is not an uncommon question. As we talked I tried to gently point her toward changing the focus of her concern to those outside the faith. But it is difficult to build desire to win over those who do not know Christ when we are not convinced of our own salvation. How can I minister Christ’s love if I am not abiding in Him? We are to love Christ, as Peter was commanded, by tending the sheep, focusing outside of ourselves. When we do that, then the focus of our evangelistic efforts becomes Christ Himself. We can begin to seek and find Christ in the other, ministering to Him in them. Jesus Himself said, “I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me... when you did it to one of the least” (Matt. 25:36,40). The focus must always be on Christ, and especially as we see Him in the other.

Let me conclude with this short poem which has been quoted a number of different ways by various saints throughout history. “O my Lord, if I seek You from fear of hell, send me to hell. If I worship You in hope of heaven, keep me from heaven. But if I love You for who You are alone, let me dwell with You eternally.” May we always love and worship Christ for Himself alone. May we seek and find Him in every person we meet.

Wednesday of 5 Lent
April 10, 2019

Yes, Lord, you know I love you —John 21:16

On the night before He was betrayed, the Lord gave to His disciples three commandments: “Do this in remembrance of Me,” “wash one another’s feet,” and “love one another.” All three of these are communal in nature. We break bread together in Communion. We minister to one another in washing each other’s feet. And the final command was one Jesus called a “new” commandment. He said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.” And then He gives the reason to do this: “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). One gets the impression that Jesus wants us to work together in love for Him and each other.

Peter was arguing that He did love Jesus. It is an argument that I often hear—especially from those who absent themselves from communal worship. But how does Jesus know we love Him? If we do what He commands (John 14:15,23). And what does He command? That we commune together at His table, minister to one another’s needs, and love one another as He has loved us. It is all so very simple. At least in theory. Practice is something else entirely.

“Yes, Lord, you know I love you...” Then “tend My sheep”. Love one another. There are some basics described in Scripture for expressing our love for one another. We are to “speak the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). When we become estranged we are to reconcile (Matt. 18:15-17; 5:23-24). And we are to honor our brothers and sisters, thinking more highly of them than of ourselves (Rom. 12:3-10). Maintaining relationship with Christ is essential for these things to be possible. We are fallen creatures, and selfish by that nature. But with the gift of repentance we can overcome ourselves and put on Christ, that we may learn to love one another as Christ loves.

Thursday of 5 Lent
April 11, 2019

*[Jesus] said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?”
—John 21:17*

Why was Peter grieved? In verse 17, Jesus uses a different word for love than he used in His first two questions. In verses 15 and 16, He asks Peter, “Do you love (*agapao* - the verb form of *agape*) Me?” But in verse 17, the last request, He asks, “Do you love (*phileo* - brotherly love) Me?” Sadly, this gets lost in the English translation because English has only one word for love.

In the first two instances Jesus is asking Peter if he loves Him with an unconditional, spiritual love. This is the love that we have received by the Holy Spirit. But the third time that Jesus asks Peter if he loves Him, He uses ‘*phileo*’, which speaks of affection, fondness, and liking the other. This is a relational, affectionate love. He is asking Peter, “Can we be friends, too? Can we have a brotherly friendship in our love?” He wants to know if Peter loves Him not just because of who He is as God, but rather in intimate companionship. He asked it this way the third time because He wanted to know that Peter cared about Him as a person. Peter may have thought that this was a lesser form of love, but Jesus wanted Peter to know what true reconciliation looks like. Real, complete reconciliation requires both kinds of love.

Jesus wants to have a deep, personal, intimate relationship with each one of us, a relationship that goes beyond the relationship of servant and Lord. If we keep the Lord at arms length, and worship Him as God Incarnate, but we don’t take time to just sit with Him, listen, and spend quality time with Him, then we are missing out on the fulness of relationship with Him.

If we are honest, our relationship with Jesus often takes a back seat to our other relationships and our daily tasks and routines. But Jesus is asking, “Do you love Me?” Do you *phileo* Jesus?

Friday of 5 Lent April 12, 2019

Lord you know everything —John 21:17

Peter knows in his heart that he loves Jesus. But he knows there is more, there is always more that he can do to show his love. He may not be good at showing it, but the love is there. And Jesus is capable of discerning that love because He knows everything.

For the vast majority of us in the Church, we have grown up knowing that Jesus loves us. We learned it as a song when we were young: “Jesus loves me this I know...” But for many of us we really don’t have a clue how much we love Jesus. Like Peter we can argue with the Lord decrying His questioning of our love. Nevertheless, again like Peter, we know that our expression of love for Him is not what it could be. There is more that we can do.

Each time Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love Me?” Peter answered, “You know!” And the third time, in his grief over the questioning and the use of the familiar verb *phileo*, Peter calls upon Christ Himself as witness. We too have failed and faltered in our love for Jesus. But the good news is that Jesus knows. He is always aware of our childlike attempts to convey that love to Him.

On our refrigerator at home there is a paper that my granddaughter, Ruth, with the help of her mother, prepared for Miranda. It is titled, “All About My Oma”. It was given to Miranda on Mother’s Day as a sign of love from granddaughter to grandmother. There are some errors in fact on it. For example, it declares that Oma “is 2 years old.” Regardless, this document is prominently displayed in our home because it is a testament to Ruth’s love for her Oma.

God has our refrigerator art on display in heaven. He knows everything, even the things that we don’t get quite right. He knows our love, and He wants us to know how much we love Him. When we do, we will know there is more that we can do to show that love. That will help us to grow in our love for Him.

Saturday of 5 Lent April 13, 2019

“Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go.” And after this [Jesus] said to him, “Follow me.” —John 21:18-19

During my sabbatical in 2013, I visited St. Margaret Mary Church in Swannanoa. The priest preached a sermon entitled, “Unpack for the Journey”. His basic message was that we carry many worldly burdens with us in our daily walk, and in order to follow Jesus, we need to let go of those. In the scripture quote above, Jesus is telling Peter to do just that. If we are going to follow Jesus, we must let go of the things that bind us to this world, and let Him gird us, fill our backpack with things of His choosing, and follow Him.

Bishop John Holloway used to preach that every member of the CEC needs to have a valid, up-to-date passport. It is one of the ways that we can be ready to respond quickly to God’s call. If He calls us to a mission overseas, will we be ready? You say, “But I’m not called to be a missionary.” Jesus tells Peter in the verse above, “when you are old...another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go.” Wait a minute. Do I not have a say in this? You have free will, but if your will is not truly submitted to Christ then you, not Christ, are still in control. St. Paul said, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). That is the goal: total submission to Christ. And it is also a process—a process of unpacking, letting go of our will and submitting to Christ. None of us are there — yet! But by His grace we can grow into the fulness of relationship with Him.

Peter repented. He had this profound interaction with Jesus. And through this encounter he was fully restored to right relationship with His Lord, and that gave him the courage to accept the call. Will you accept the call? Will you unpack for the journey?

Holy Week: The Gift of Repentance Palm Sunday, April 14, 2019

Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. — Luke 5:31-32

I hope that these meditations have made obvious that repentance is a gift. It is a work of the Holy Spirit in us resulting in an act that flows out of us. Although it is our act, it does not originate from within us. In fact, in our naturally stubborn, rebellious hearts the whole notion of repentance is foreign. It must be granted to us by God Himself in order to be real. We could not even conceive of such a thing if left to ourselves. Instead, we would come up with all sorts of excuses for our sin and would point our depraved fingers at everyone else. But by His grace, God grants repentance to His adopted children whom He patiently disciplines: “Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent” (Rev. 3:19). For even when our minds grow weary and our hearts doubt the promises of God, He remains faithful to His promises and patient toward His people “not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

It is a gift because we cannot do it without God’s aid. This is why Peter was flabbergasted to see Gentiles repenting. It meant that God had indeed been working in the hearts of those who had previously been considered beyond His reach. And God is continually seeking and searching for His lost sheep. He uses multiple means to call us and bestow on us His gift of repentance.

And though, as this Holy Week reminds us, we have already been forgiven of our sins through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, we are called to continue in our repentance so that we might become holy and blameless. It is a call to live perpetually in God’s grace, an *on-going* work of God in us. So let us look as some specific ways that God calls us and gives us the grace of repentance. And let Him challenge us to not only seek but accept the gift of repentance.

Monday of Holy Week April 15, 2019

The Written Word

Read Daniel 9:1-5

Rosaria Butterfield, a UNC Western Literature professor and a former lesbian and atheist, was won over by reading the Word. She recorded her conversion in her book titled *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor’s Journey into the Christian Faith*. She has become a powerful witness for Christ, declaring, “...repentance and victory over sin are God’s gifts.”

In her testimony, Butterfield says, “I was working on a book ‘exposing’ the religious right from a lesbian feminist point of view. I approached the Bible with an agenda to tear it down because I firmly believed that it was threatening, dangerous, and irrational. But when I came to Christ, I experienced what nineteenth-century Scottish theologian Thomas Chalmers called ‘the expulsive power of a new affection.’ ... As my union with Christ grew, the sanctification that it birthed put a wedge between my old self and my new one. In time, this contradiction exploded, and I was able to claim identity in Christ alone.”

In the same way, Daniel came to repentance through the Word. We have already examined Daniel’s experience of repentance in the meditations of 3 Lent. But what prompted that act? Daniel records, “I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years which, according to the word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years” (9:2). The written Word is a formidable witness to the redeeming power and love of God. But are we spending quality time in the Word? Jesus said, “You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me” (John 5:39). Are you spending meditative time in the Word, or simply “study” time? The Pharisees study the Word. The faithful embrace the Word, both written and Living!

Tuesday of Holy Week April 16, 2019

The Word Spoken Through Others

Read Acts 2:36-38

In 1996, I had the privilege of attending a Billy Graham Crusade in Charlotte while attending the school of Evangelism. I was sitting in the upper section of the Carolina Panthers' stadium. Two young men sat down behind me and it quickly became obvious from their conversation that one had twisted the arm of the other to be there. The reluctant one ridiculed just about every aspect of the proceedings and insisted that "I'll be damned if I go down to that field." Then Billy came on, and in his pleasant, southern drawl proclaimed the Gospel. The young man's ridicule ceased, and I could hear him utter statements every now and then like, "What did he say?" "How can that be?" And so forth. Then came the altar call, and his friend couldn't get out of the way fast enough for this young man to reach the aisle.

All too often we are reluctant to give heed to certain people because of prejudice or preconceived notions of who God would choose to be his vehicle of proclamation. In Acts 2:13 Luke tells us that the people thought the disciples were drunk. There was doubt and ridicule in abundance until Peter began to preach and several thousand were added to the number of believers. Bishop Costantino, who died in 2006, experienced such an event at a conference where he was the featured speaker. A woman came to him after his first talk and told him that she had a word for him. He assured her that God wouldn't send someone like her to give him a word. She insisted, so he said, "Ask God what sin I confessed yesterday, and if he tells you I'll listen." She came back and told him, "I asked, and God says that He has forgotten." To his credit Bishop Costantino let her give him the word.

Are there people from whom you won't receive the Word? Why is that? Ask God to open those channels for His gift of repentance.

Wednesday of Holy Week April 17, 2019

The Absence of God

Read Luke 24:13-24

In the book, *Come Be My Light*, about Mother Teresa's spiritual journey, we get a glimpse of her struggle over a period of fifty years. She confesses to various spiritual directors, priests, and bishops her sense of the profound absence of God in her life. In one letter to her confessor she offers this prayer:

Lord, my God, who am I that You should forsake me? The Child of your Love--and now become as the most hated one--the one You have thrown away as unwanted--unloved. I call, I cling, I want--and there is no One to answer--no One on Whom I can cling--no, No One.--Alone ... Where is my Faith--even deep down right in there is nothing but emptiness & darkness--My God--how painful is this unknown pain--I have no Faith--I dare not utter the words & thoughts that crowd in my heart--& make me suffer untold agony. So many unanswered questions live within me--I'm afraid to uncover them--because of the blasphemy--If there be God--please forgive me...

As you can see from the quote above, the perceived absence of God prompted Mother Teresa to cry out in repentance and beg for His forgiveness. When I was in college I worked as a house sitter for various college professors. It was a difficult time for me financially, emotionally, and spiritually. I was thirsty for God, but afraid because He seemed so distant from me. One night, in a fit of great pain, I cried out asking God why I was so desolate. He clearly responded, "Because in the desert you must grow deep roots." I broke down in tears and asked Him to forgive me for my doubts and anger toward Him.

Are you experiencing spiritual dryness or desolation? The temptation is to try to "cure" the problem. But can you experience the absence of God as invitation? A gift of repentance?

Maundy Thursday **April 18, 2019**

God Touching Mind, Body, Spirit *Read Luke 1:18-20,59-64*

Sometimes a head cold is just a head cold. Other times it is a wake up call from God, a reminder that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit and need rest, nourishment, and exercise. And sometimes God touches our body, our mind, or our spirit in order to call us to repentance. In the passage noted above, John the Baptist's father was struck mute by God in order to bring him to obedience and repentance. He accepted the gift and rejoiced greatly in God in a Spirit inspired song of praise (Luke 1:67-79).

My father was a nominal Christian most of his short life. But at the age of 48 he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and that changed everything for him. During an exploratory surgery to determine the possibility of removal of the tumor he died on the operating table and was successfully revived. During the time his heart was stopped he had a revelation of Christ's love for him. Upon awaking he called for our parish priest and made his confession. His life was transformed.

God is trying to speak to us, to invite us to receive the gift of repentance. But are we listening? According to the FDA over 17 million Americans take analgesics every day, not simply to treat pain, but to avoid it completely. However, pain is one way that our bodies speak to us, and a means for God to communicate with us via our bodies. There is obviously a right use of analgesics; however pain avoidance may be inhibiting our ability to hear from God. Are you doing self-administered palliative care to avoid repentance? Or maybe you are experiencing a troubling in your mind or spirit. Are you paying attention to these signs and lifting them up before the Lord? He wants to speak to us, and He often uses our bodies as a vehicle of communication. Don't hide from Him, embrace Him and ask Him to speak to you personally.

Good Friday **April 19, 2019**

Events *Read Acts 9:1-19*

St. Paul's experience on the road to Damascus is one of the most famous examples of the gift of repentance. Though there were words spoken to Paul by Jesus—words that only he could understand—the primary means Jesus used to call Paul to repent was the event itself. There was, as it were, a pyrotechnic display of Christ's power and authority, such that Paul's immediate response was to humble himself before Jesus and call Him Lord.

Sadly, there are many Christians who have had a similar type of experience and are waiting for the sequel—an encore performance. There was a young woman in my second parish who had come to the Lord through a “Damascus Road experience” in her early 20s. Subsequently she desperately sought a repeat performance, attending every revival and Christian conference she could in order to be present for the promised “signs and wonders.” She also doubted my salvation because I could not point to such an occasion in my life. Miranda was, as she describes, “quick fried” with a Pauline type experience. I, however, have grown up knowing the Lord, never having known a time when He was not real to me. Miranda describes me as a “slow drip Christian.” For this young woman, and many others like her, unless there is a specific event in your life that you can point to as your gift of repentance moment, a specific moment in time when you accepted Christ, your salvation can't be real. This is not the case. Our God meets each one of us in the unique way that we need so that we may acknowledge Him.

Have you had an intimate encounter with the Lord? Are you waiting for an encore? Or have you been a slow drip Christian and now want a pyrotechnic display? Or maybe you want to avoid such because it is “not your style.” God is sovereign. He knows what each of us needs. Let Him lead you to repentance in His way.

Holy Saturday April 20, 2019

Images

Read Acts 10:9-11

There is tremendous power in images. The Eastern Orthodox recognize this and promote the use of Christian Icons in their worship of Christ. Many a saint, known and unknown, have come to Christ through the ministry of iconography. But God's invitation to repentance is not limited to iconographic art. The gift of repentance can come through much more common images.

Norma McCorvey, who was known as "Roe" in the court case *Roe vs. Wade*, had just such an experience. She said,

I was sitting in O.R.'s (Operation Rescue) offices when I noticed a fetal development poster. The progression was so obvious, the eyes were so sweet. It hurt my heart, just looking at them. I ran outside and finally, it dawned on me. 'Norma', I said to myself, 'They're right'...something in that poster made me lose my breath. I kept seeing the picture of that tiny, 10-week-old embryo, and I said to myself, that's a baby! It's as if blinders just fell off my eyes and I suddenly understood the truth—that's a baby! I felt crushed under the truth of this realization...Abortion—at any point—was wrong. It was so clear. Painfully clear.

Norma McCorvey was granted the gift of repentance through the power of an image.

There are images all around us: in Church, yes, but also in nature, art, even children's doodlings. But are we actively seeking Him? Are we looking for Christ in the everyday images of our lives? Are there images God has given to you—signs—that you are ignoring?

God is calling us to relationship, repentance, and newness of life. He is sending us images to alert us to His Truth.

Easter Sunday April 21, 2019

In His Resurrection from the dead, Jesus conquered sin, death, and Satan. None of these three have any power over those who are in Christ Jesus our Lord. In Him we have eternal life. In Him the enemy's accusations fall away in the Truth. In Him we have full forgiveness of ALL of our sins.

In Psalm 103:8-12, King David praises Almighty God singing:

"The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger for ever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor requite us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us."

Our God is merciful. He has given us the free gift of repentance, and in His grace and mercy He has removed our sins far from us—as far as the east is from the west!

On this Easter Day, let us remember that God loved the world so much "that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." We all know this verse by heart, but do not miss the good news in the next: "For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:16-17). He came NOT to condemn us. He came to pour forth the Father's mercy on us.

Let us conclude with the benediction given to us by our first Patriarch. As you go forth this Easter, "always remember the Gospel: that God was in Christ Jesus, reconciling the world to Himself, not counting our sins against us. God loves you, God has forgiven you, God is not mad at you and God will never leave you nor forsake you. And the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be with you and remain with you forever. Amen."