

“Turning and Returning”
Joel 2:12-16a - February 25, 2009

INTRO: Our reading gives us some clues to ways that people are moved off dead-center, in terms of their relationship with God. We hear some of the things that long ago, commonly helped that relationship grow, as people are called to return to God—through fasting, prayer, and giving gifts—ways of opening ourselves to God.

A little confession is not a bad thing, every now and then. I confess that I’ve lived in the parsonage long enough now, that dust bunnies are appearing under my bed. No, they are not something that I went looking for, or that I even worry about, but they are a reminder that I need to be cleaning more regularly. I found those bunnies when I went looking for a lost dog toy, and bent down to look under the bed. I found no toy, but on that pretty hardwood floor, I found lots of other fuzzy things instead. I almost wish I hadn’t looked, because it’s now obvious something needs to be done about them.

Sometimes we don’t know how bad things are, or what kind of shape things are in, until something causes us to look more closely. It’s often that way with housecleaning. Think about dusting, and ovens and toilets and sinks. I don’t know about you, but I can go a long time before I respond to that kind of dirt. And I think it may be that way with people’s lives. We may go day after day, without looking closely. We keep trucking along, keeping on keeping on, perhaps without even being able to name what we’ve done wrong, how we’ve hurt someone, how we’ve failed to be faithful.

“Among sinners, repentance is generally the last alternative. There is a whole range of previous defenses, explanations, justifications, resolutions, distractions--to protect us from the possibility.” (James Nestingen)

We may not even hear the call to be honest, the call to return to God, unless we sense our need for a clean start.

In the movie *Tender Mercies*, Mac Sledge was an alcoholic drifter, who found himself drunk and flat out on the floor, in a two bit motel, in the barren flatlands of Texas. He was a once-famous country singer, whose life had simply deteriorated and deteriorated. He hit bottom with no money, no family, no career. Mac woke up in that motel, to find that he was not only hung-over, but he had no money to pay for his room, and the buddy that had been with him, had taken off. That’s where Rosalee, the owner of the motel comes into his life. (PLAY Excerpt from *Tender Mercies* the first episode # 3, on the CD)

This episode ends with the church pastor saying “We’ll have to work on you then.” Well, maybe God was already working on Mac, helping him see that he’d lived a hard life and made some bad choices, and it was about time he cleaned up his act. He had the great good fortune of running into Rosalee, who helps set up some boundaries and a place to start, for Mac to get healthy: “There’s no drinking while you’re working here.” Rosalee loved and cared for him, sharing life with him and most of the time, enjoying his company. Her grace was operative as she gives him multiple chances to change and stay sober.

Anne Lamott is one of my favorite authors, and she speaks of the stuff of our lives that needs to be cleaned up in her book *Grace Eventually*: “If my heart were a garden, it would be in bloom with roses and wrinkly Indian poppies and wild flowers. There would be two unmarked tracts of scorched earth, and scattered headstones covered with weeds and ivy and moss, a functioning compost pile, great tangles of blackberry bushes, and some piles of trash I’ve meant to haul away for years. I used to create a lot more garbage, and then I got sober twenty years ago. Now I try to clean as I go, because sober people taught me that a willingness to help clean up the mess we’ve made is a crucial part of adult living; that our scary, selfish, damaging behavior litters the planet. I confess that in my emotional trash heap are some rusty old cans from ten and twelve years ago, when several close friendships broke up irretrievably. Garbage hardens your heart.” (p. 107-108)

We all need people in our lives, and especially the love of God, to help us deal with the garbage. It may be that in our relationship with God, it works best when we are in a relationship that’s similar to a child with a loving parent. When children do something wrong, the key to restoring the relationship with the parent, is “a positive conclusion in which the children fully understand their wrongdoing, repent of it, while at the same time they are fully assured of their parents’ unconditional love. Parents may ask: ‘What did you do wrong?’ which allows the child to take responsibility, ‘Why was this act wrong?’ helps

someone learn about the consequences of actions. And ‘What will you do differently the next time?’ how to respond in similar situations in the future.” (Scott Turansky)

Like our loving God, loving parents end that discussion with words that let their children know they have faith and trust in them to make changes in the future.

“All too often even genuine repentance stops with a sense of regret or sorrow for what we have done. We have all had the experience of asking God or someone else to forgive the same thing over and over again. But what if we acknowledged our sin in a deeper way? What if instead of simply asking God to forgive us, we asked God to change the *source* of that sin in us? What if we asked God to reform our desire or will to sin in that way? For example, if you have just hurt someone you love by something you said, don’t just say you are sorry. Don’t just ask for forgiveness; ask God to change the part of your personality or experience that produced those hurtful words.” (David Griebner -*Upper Room Disciplines*, 2008, 2/5.)

The Sufi mystic Mishkatal-Masabaih reminds us, when we are overwhelmed by our own inadequacies, our own diversions from the straight paths of life, that the mercy of God is always greater than the sin of being too humanly human. He writes: “She who approaches near to me one span, I will approach near to her on cubit; And she who approaches near to me one cubit, I will approach near to her one fathom; And whoever approaches me walking, I will come to her running; and she who meets me with sins equivalent to the whole world, I will greet her with forgiveness equal to it.” (Joan Chittister, *The Monastic Way*, 1/08)

That’s the way God is with us. We can turn and return over and over and over again, and God will be ready to meet us. We can bring to God, the dusty corners of our lives, the situations of failure, the times we have hurt one another, we God will simply offer mercy and forgiveness.

I had a Lands End coat--an old coat, whose zipper just stopped working a couple years ago. A friend told me that Lands End merchandise is guaranteed, and that if I let them know, they might send me a new coat. I thought that sounded a little crazy, I had had this coat a very long time—I didn’t even know how long. But I contacted them, and I returned the coat. And regardless of how old that coat was, they sent me a new one with a working zipper, no questions asked.

That’s not an advertisement for Lands End, but an advertisement for God. Because that is the kind of return policy we have with God. We need to first come to the realization that things are in a mess, and we have responsibility for making changes, and then just turn around and return to the God of infinite love.

--Sue Burwell