

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on March 2, 2022 (Ash Wednesday)

Return. Return to the Lord. Return to the Lord your God with all your heart. That's the Lenten call. That's the Lenten invitation. That's the Lenten opportunity. To return and rededicate your life to the way of God, to the way of love.

And on Ash Wednesday, we're reminded that the first step of return is repentance. To repent and return to the Lord is the call of this day. The word "repent" itself means a turning of the heart. So it's an inward action, an action in direct opposition to the empty, outward displays of piety against which Jesus cautions. "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them." His point being that faith is not about outward appearances or the image we project to the world, but the inward intentions of our hearts. Which takes contemplation and reflection and introspection.

And if we're honest, we're not great at repentance. For to repent is to look deeply into our souls and admit wrongdoing. We're so much better at distracting ourselves and chasing shiny objects than we are at doing the hard, interior work of repentance. It's much easier to give in to the external noise that is so pervasive in our lives — to go down internet rabbit holes or turn on the TV or talk about other people. Anything to avoid gazing into the mirror and taking a long, hard look at ourselves. At our complicity, at our self-centeredness, at our sinfulness. Repentance is hard work and, as with conflict, we prefer to avoid it. Afraid of what we might see or encounter in ourselves.

Which is why the Litany of Penitence we say after the imposition of ashes is so convicting. In it, we come face to face with our sinful and broken selves. We ask for mercy, we confess our utter depravity and we throw ourselves upon God's abounding love and compassion. We repent and return to the Lord.

And if the first step of returning to the Lord is repentance, the first step of repentance is telling the truth. About ourselves and about our world.

There's been a lot of talk these days and controversy over doing just that — over telling the truth. We see this when communities or groups seek to whitewash history or burn books. We seek to hide the hard facts that lead to uncomfortable truths. We see this when we choose what history to teach, based not on truth but on a narrative that better fits with the image we seek to convey. We see this in our country when we don't want to face the ugly truths of Jim Crow and the lynching tree. When we don't want to face the sometimes subtle but always soul-sucking ways in which people of color have been shut out of the American dream.

In the same way, we often whitewash our own history. We ignore or cover up those things for which we need to repent. Those things for which we need to get down on our knees and rub ashes on our foreheads and truly and humbly say we're sorry. Those things we have done and those things we have left undone. And when we fail to face them, we're only fooling ourselves. We're certainly not fooling God. The one to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid.

"Rend your hearts and not your garments," cries the prophet Joel. Tear apart the ways in which we've been lying to ourselves and take a good, hard look at how we have acted towards others and towards ourselves. Being honest with ourselves does not always come naturally or easily. Because the picture we see is not always flattering. And while we may carefully curate our image on Facebook, God sees right into our hearts. The first part of repentance is telling the truth. And unless we're telling the truth in our own hearts, to our own selves, we're always going to leave a gap between our souls and God's love for us.

The good news of this day is that when we're honest with ourselves, as hard and as uncomfortable as that may be — the good news is that God still and always loves us. "Return to the Lord, your God," says Joel, "for he is for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing." The God we return to in all our brokenness, the God to whom we repent is merciful and compassionate and abounding in steadfast love.

"Rend your hearts and not your garments." And if it is the heart that symbolizes the core of our being, this is yet another call to strip away the external trappings of faith and focus on the inner life of Christ's love. Sometimes it's good to be reminded of the essentials. Lent does that for us. Because Lent is about claiming and then pro-claiming God as the single most important priority of your life. Everything else is tangential; everything else is external to what really matters. The sooner we actualize this in our lives, the closer we come to that elusive peace of God that surpasses all understanding. And it all begins on this day; this day when we are called upon to repent and return to the Lord.

The Rev. Tim Schenck
Rector, St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church
Hingham, Massachusetts