

Yr. C, Ash Wednesday  
March 6, 2019  
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan  
St. Peter's Episcopal Church  
752 Words

Lessons: Isaiah 58:1-12  
Psalm 103:8-14  
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10  
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Turning is the *first thing* we must do if we want to follow Jesus. To deny our need to turn is to boast that we are already perfectly aligned with the One who *is* perfect. And none of us are that good. None of us are that true. So, we must *begin* to follow in the way of Jesus' love by turning. We always begin following Jesus by changing.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century Shaker song puts it like this:

“When true simplicity is gained to bow and to bend, we shall not be ashamed,  
to turn, turn, will be our delight till by turning, turning we come round right.”

We use this word ‘turn’ so much more frequently and comfortably than we use John the Baptist’s word—repent. They mean the same thing. It’s just that a few generations of preachers have nearly ruined the beauty of the word ‘repent.’

We can better imagine ourselves turning—left or right. We know how to turn on the radio or turn off the television. A pastor like me wonders if those who could not turn down pancakes on Shrove Tuesday will *also* turn up on Ash Wednesday. After all, most people are turned off by thinking about penitence and death.

Yet, there are always faithful people who come to worship on Ash Wednesday, turning our focus inward—to lament our sins, acknowledge our wretchedness, and make a right beginning of a holy Lent.

Do you see how we have adapted every single preposition in our language to match with this verb ‘turn.’ To turn is *to change* in every conceivable direction and manner.

The question, therefore, is this: How do we turn into the people God calls us to be? There are so many confusing choices. Which way do we turn to follow Jesus?

I believe Isaiah is the preeminent Jewish prophet for Christian people to hear and heed. After all, Jesus’ own, personal mission statement—which he read out loud to his hometown friends and neighbors—came straight from the scroll of the prophet, Isaiah.

On Ash Wednesday we heed *these* challenging words from God, spoken through Isaiah: “Is (*this*)...the fast I choose? A day to humble *yourself*? For you to bow down like a bulrush? Will you call *this* a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?” (These questions strongly suggest that God’s answer is no.)

Lest there be any doubt in our minds, God answers our doubts with *more questions*: “Is not *this* the fast I (actually) choose: (for you) to loose the bonds of injustice, (for you) to undo the thongs of the yoke, (for you) to let oppressed people go free...” Is it not (for you) to share *your* bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into *your* house; when you see the naked, (for you) *clothe them*, and (for you) not (to) hide yourself from your own kin?”

So, it seems on Ash Wednesday that if we *only* attempt to turn our focus inward, and bow *our bodies* down, God remains unimpressed. God’s deeper desire is that we turn...our eyes, our hearts, and our hands outward in order to lift *up* God’s *other children* who are either pushed down or held down.

“Then, your light shall break forth like the dawn. Then you shall call, and the Lord *will* answer. Then you shall cry for help, and the Lord will say, ‘*Here I am.*’” According to Isaiah *and to Jesus*, it is as simple and as challenging as that.

The simple, challenging truth is that every last *ounce* of love within us, above and below us, beside and between us...every last ounce of love belongs to God. It is *of God*. So the way we get to *experience* God’s love is by *sharing it*—especially with those who are *less* loved and valued on earth than in heaven.

Beloved, we begin to follow Jesus by turning. And, as we can see, by turning outward, we are actually turning into the way of love.

On Wednesday nights this Lent I will offer six more brief reflections about the Way of Love. I will encourage you to consider these simple and challenging practices which help us follow Jesus in thought, word, and deed.

We begin today by turning into the Way of Love.

As the Shaker Song goes:      “When true simplicity is gained to bow and to bend, we shall not be ashamed,  
to turn, turn, will be our *delight* till by turning, turning we come round right.”

Amen.