

Tonight, Ash Wednesday, we begin the season of Lent, the season of repentance, the season of anticipation and preparation for Holy Week when Jesus suffered a fake trial and a real crucifixion. The ashes are a reminder that we human beings started out as dust, as dirt, as clay, and it is only because of the grace and the love of God that we were created and molded and spirit breathed into us so that we might be truly alive and even more, in the image of God. Ashes are what is left when the fire is burned out – when the usefulness and heat and warmth have been used up. Ashes are what would be left of all of us if not for the grace of God.

And so in Lent we repent. We remember. But what does it mean to repent? Is it just a matter of feeling really bad and saying, “Sorry?” A while ago I went through a phase of watching that TV show called *Supernanny*. It was a reality show – not sure if it is still on – in which a real live British nanny (who for sure, didn’t look anything like Mary Poppins) who goes to visit with a different American family each week to help the parents sort out their parenting difficulties. The households usually have at least two out of control small children, a mother who is being driven bonkers, and a father who is concerned but who is gone all day.

One of the recurring themes for the nanny is discipline and respect by the children for the parents. When misbehavior occurs, the nanny teaches the principle of “time-out” but adds it to a “naughty corner” or a “naughty mat” where the child goes to be alone to think over what he or she has done. At the end of the specified period of time, the parent is supposed to talk calmly with the child to be sure the child understands what the punishment is actually for, and to receive a verbal sign of repentance, though they don’t use the theologically loaded word, “repentance.” The child has to say, “sorry” and mean it. And the nanny is very picky about the tone of voice of the “sorry.” It has to be genuine.

Usually, the child eventually cooperates with a more or less genuine sounding “sorry” and if we can judge by the tears, I expect the child feels bad. I’m not sure though, that even a genuine “sorry” is what God means by repentance. I’m not sure either, that God really values our feeling bad. It is what comes after the feeling bad and saying “sorry” that matters.

Fasting was a traditional form of repentance in ancient Judaism. Temporarily not eating was a deprivation which was supposed to indicate repentance and was considered a way of honoring God. In our passage for tonight, Isaiah is not opposed to fasting which can sometimes indeed be a valuable spiritual discipline, but Isaiah says that the reason for the fasting is what makes all the difference in the eyes of God: “Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bullrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?” This kind of fasting says Isaiah, is for show; it is empty and meaningless because it does not result in change.

Thankfully, God offers forgiveness and opportunities for fresh beginnings. But this passage from Isaiah tells us that repentance is not about feeling bad; it’s not about performing pious rituals; it is rather a matter of intention and follow-through.

Our intentions matter a lot. Our intentions provide the energy for true repentance. And it does take energy for real repentance – which is not about fasting and sackcloth; it is about “loosing the bonds of injustice, undoing the thongs of the yoke, letting the oppressed go free. Sharing our bread with the hungry, and bringing the homeless poor into your house; clothing the naked.” None of that happens if we sit around feeling bad and saying “sorry.” It takes initiative and energy and determination to repent.

A father caught his teenaged son doing something stupid and bad. The father disciplined the son. The boy protested, “But I didn’t mean to.” The father replied, “That isn’t enough. You should have meant not to.” Repentance was defined by a little girl very simply, “It’s to be sorry enough to quit.” To be sorry enough to quit doing the thing we are sorry about. And repentance means not just not doing something; it means doing

something. There needs to be some energy to drive righteousness rather than an energy-less falling into whatever comes along.

One night, beloved, irascible mayor of New York in the 1930's, Fiorello LaGuardia, walked into a night court session, shoved aside the sitting judge from his bench, and took over for the evening. A trembling old woman was brought before him. The woman was charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She admitted that she had stolen the bread and explained that her daughter's husband had left and her daughter and two grandchildren were starving. LaGuardia responded, "The law makes no exception. I can do nothing but sentence you to a fine of \$10." But LaGuardia reached into his own pocket, pulled out \$10 and paid the woman's fine for her. "Furthermore," he declared, "I'm going to fine everybody in this courtroom 50 cents for living in a town where a grandmother has to steal bread in order for her grandchildren to eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to this defendant!" The hat was passed and the astonished woman left the courtroom with \$47.50 with which to feed her family.

In that case, the "sorryness" was pretty much immaterial to the case of this perhaps apocryphal story, because everyone in the room should have been sorry. The repentance and righteousness was carried out not by the defendant but by the judge and all the people in the room. The energy for the righteousness came from LaGuardia – he not only felt badly for the woman, but he did something about it – made a kind of rough justice by paying the fine, and exacting a token payment from everyone else. It wasn't just, "oh you poor thing." He changed, at least temporarily, the situation of that family.

As all of you know in your lives with your family and all your relationships, "sorry" will do once or twice, but after a while, just "sorry" doesn't cut it. There has to be change. Fortunately for all of us, God continues to forgive and forgive long after our family and friends would have had it. But all that forgiveness from God still does not mean we don't have to change, quit doing the things we are sorry about.

A good life is not a life free from sin. Only Jesus managed that. But a good life for each one of us is one in which our words and our actions are a pretty good match for our intentions. A good life is not only about whether we are charitable toward those less fortunate than ourselves. Working toward justice in the world is just the evidence, the outward sign of the state of our souls. If we cannot share, then we are probably selfish and greedy not only with our material things, but with our forgiveness, with our love, with our compassion. If we cannot see the needs of others across the world, then we probably don't see very well the needs of our own children or spouse or friends. We may even be blind to our own needs. That blindness, that selfishness, that greed and pride, are all what make us in need of repentance, in need of developing the kind of real intentions that carry with them the impetus to actually act.

Then says Isaiah, when our intentions and actions match, when the energy of our repentance takes the form of righteous behavior, then "your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly ... if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday." God's forgiveness is already there for us, but in order to access it, experience it, to know it, feel it, we have to actually repent. And this forgiveness, this healing this lightening of the gloom, this relief of a burden, will come to us not so much as God's reward for being good – a cookie for being a good girl – but righteousness itself feels like healing, feels like light, feels like relief. The passage continues, "and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail."

By putting ashes on our foreheads or our hands tonight, we are proclaiming our intentions – our understanding of ourselves as creatures in need of repentance, of healing, of change. And so, may all our good intentions tonight be loaded with the impetus and commitment of true repentance. May we all then experience the healing, the joy, the relief, of a watered garden after a drought, as our repentance brings righteousness to our own lives and justice to the lives of those around us. Amen