

Ash Wednesday
February 21, 2007

Pastor Mae Jean Zelle
Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, USA

Scriptures: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; 2Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 6-21

Tonight we come to church to do a very counter-cultural thing. We come to own up to a couple of things that most of society tries to avoid: that we are sinful and that we are mortal. Most of the time the modern world is looking for ways to avoid death, in particular, and suffering, in general. And most of the time, most of us are trying to put ourselves forward as pretty decent people: good, hard-working, honest, caring, trustworthy, reasonably patient and self-controlled people.

But tonight we do something entirely different. We come to begin a season of self-examination and repentance. We come, with humble hearts, to acknowledge the ways in which we fall woefully short of being the persons God calls us to be. And we come to kneel and let some ashes be pressed onto our foreheads – as a reminder of our impermanence, and our need for humility in the presence of the Holy and Infinite One.

Usually that first step, the repentance, comes across as a really somber, and not especially pleasant thing to do. Maybe it is a leftover from the days when we were kids and a parent or teacher made us say we were sorry (even if we weren't really). Or maybe we have some pretty serious things to repent and the shame or guilt of acknowledging we have done, or not done, something grave is too much to bear so we try to deny, or defend, our actions. Sometimes we speak of repentance as a time to be "brutally honest" with ourselves. None of that sounds like it could be good, or life-giving. But it is, or can be.

Repentance, at its heart, is not about beating ourselves up about what terrible persons we are. Repentance is about letting down the barriers, uncovering the parts of ourselves we hide, opening our hearts to the ways we impact other people, for good or ill. That's when forgiveness can happen.

Repentance, the honest, no-holds-barred, "I'm really sorry God", repentance is the beginning of an opportunity for God to do something new in our lives. Repentance is how the places that were once filled with remorse or self-loathing can be re-filled with peace – with God, with others, and with ourselves. Repentance is the beginning of the second chance God is always giving us. That doesn't sound so bad, does it?

Alfred Nobel had that kind of second chance. He was a Swedish chemist who, in 1867, "invented a new high explosive, which he named "dynamite." He was convinced that his invention would make war too horrible to ever happen again. However, he quickly discovered there was no shortage of buyers for his new explosive. He made a huge fortune from its sales, yet was horrified with the suffering and misery it caused in wars and conflicts. But what was he to do?

Towards the end of the 19th, century he awoke one morning to read his own obituary in the local paper: "Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, who died yesterday, devised a way for more people to be killed in a war than ever before. He died a very rich man."

Actually, it was Alfred's older brother who had died. A newspaper reporter had confused the epitaph. But the account had a profound effect on Alfred. He decided he wanted to be known for something other than developing a means to kill people efficiently, and for amassing a fortune in the process. As a result, he initiated the Nobel Prize—an award for scientists and writers who foster peace.” *Doug Murren and Barb Sharin, Is It Real When It Doesn't Work? (Thomas Nelson, 1990)* He had the chance to change and use his life and his wealth to leave a legacy of peace-making.

Now, I don't know that he had any moment of falling to his knees for a heart-to-heart conversation with God, but he did repent. He did acknowledge the destructiveness of what he had made and the wealth he had accumulated as a result. That became the moment his life could change, that God could do a new thing through him.

We often say that God loves us just the way we are. Which is true. But a good addition to that is that God loves us too much to leave us that way. God wants to do that new thing in our lives. God is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. God also wants to create new and right spirits within us. That's why it's never too late. Its never too late to be honest about our sinfulness. It's never too late to have a new beginning.

Someone once said, “Repentance is not a fatal day when tears are shed, but a natal day when, as a result of tears, a new life begins.” That's what tonight is all about. That natal day, that new beginning. Tonight is about bowing our hearts in repentance, not as an end, or a punishment, but as a beginning again of that new life that is ours in Christ Jesus.

So, let us, with open hearts and minds, enter into that time of self-reflection. Let us be unafraid to be totally honest, and may God create in us a clean heart, a right spirit. And then may God use us to bring healing and new beginnings to all the hurting world. Amen.