

Sermon for Ash Wednesday Year C 2019
Knowing Which Way to Turn

A man shivered on a cold Chicago street.
He had lost his faith.
Someone, a stranger, handed him a little book on that frigid day.
The book was a tiny New Testament.
Wrapped in his worry,
the man turned to an index,
and he found a recommended verse to turn to for “anxiety.”
He read from the sixth chapter of Matthew,
part of the Sermon on the Mount,
. . . *do not worry about your life.*
Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

Perhaps you know this story.
I only learned about it a few months ago.
The man in the story is Stephen Colbert.
He recalled his encounter with scripture,
an encounter that brought him back to faith and to the church
during an interview that aired this past November
called “Faith in Focus.”
In the interview, Colbert stated,
“I was absolutely, immediately lightened.
I stood on the street corner in the cold and read the sermon.
And my life has never been the same.”

His life was never the same.
I think that’s true for any of us
who turn to God’s word with an open heart.
Actually, what I have discovered is that it is usually a heart
that has been broken open that receives the light of God’s grace.

Worry had worn a hole in Colbert's heart
and guilt had broken the heart of the psalmist
who cried out

*create in me a clean heart, O God,
renew a right spirit within me,
cast me not away from your presence,
restore to me the joy of my salvation.*

After the death of my brother in 1999,
I found myself praying these very words
with a heart broken open by grief
and a profound realization of the fragileness
and fleetingness of life.

Though I didn't have quite the same immediate "lightening"
experience that Colbert had,

looking back, it was those sacred words that
put me on a path back to God.

I can say along with Stephen Colbert,
my life has never been the same since.

What if we accept the ancient invitation to
journey through the season of Lent
in self-examination and repentance;
in prayer, fasting and giving,
and in reading and meditating on God's word?

If we did, might we too might find ourselves saying,
"My life has never been the same"?

One of my favorite Old Testament scholars says
the psalms present three directions of the journey of faith.

There are psalms of *orientation*—
these are seasons of wellbeing
that give rise to feelings of gratitude, joy and delight.

Conversely, there are seasons of *disorientation*, when we are in the midst of painful chaos, feeling alienated, angry, lost, and suffering either because of our sinful ways or because we have been sinned against.

The third direction is *new orientation*, times when we are surprised by grace, when we are overwhelmed with the new gifts of God and joy breaks through out despair; times when there was only darkness and now there is light.

We move through all three of these directions in our walk of faith and this is actually salutary for our growth. Because, you see, these directions, which represent seasons of our life, are transformational, they can change us.

This is one of the reasons I love the psalms as much as I do. They guide me and give me sacred words that give voice to God in prayer, especially in those times when I am in a season of disorientation, a season of not knowing which way to turn. But they are also God's word to me. And because they are God's word, they have the power to re-orient me back to God. When we are disoriented, nine-times out of ten, we are focusing too much on ourselves. And, as most good Lutherans know, this is a feature of our sinful nature: to be curved in on ourselves.

In part, this is what Jesus is getting at in the gospel for today. Jesus is pointing out some of the less helpful motivations behind much of human piety, almsgiving, prayer and fasting—our need to be seen, praised, and recognized by others.

The temptation is to value the rewards and approval of others over the benefits these practices bring to our relationship with God and with others. We are far more likely to invest ourselves in the illusion of what others can give us. That's not only about practices of piety, it's also about how we live our lives.

It's a question of finding ourselves . . . or more rightly, being found in God. To see ourselves, not through our own eyes or the eyes of others, but through the eyes of God. St. Augustine wrote in his *Confessions*, "*You [God] were within me and I was outside myself, and I searched for you in that exterior world.*"

Augustine lived a lot of his life in disorientation. He, also, was brought into new orientation by the word of God. Do you know the story of his new orientation and transformation? He was in a garden, grieving over the death of a dear friend, and he heard the words, "Take up and read. Take up and read." It was probably some children singing or playing nearby, and yet, the words were compelling to Augustine. So he took up a bible and read the first verse that his eyes hit upon. They were from Romans, chapter 13: *Not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual excess and lust, not in quarreling and jealousy. Rather, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the flesh.* Augustine wrote that instantly his heart was filled with light, "*all the darkness of doubt vanished away.*" His life was most definitely never the same. He was baptized, ordained, and consecrated as the Bishop of Milan very swiftly after this encounter with scripture.

Next to the Apostle Paul,
the writings of Augustine
have been among the most influential
on the spirituality and theology of the church.
Some have even gone so far as to say that
the conversion of Augustine is second only to that of Paul
in importance to the life of the church.
You could say this encounter with God's word
meant that the life of the church was never the same afterward.

So where are you in your journey of faith?
Are you in a place of orientation?
Perhaps a place of new orientation?
Or, perhaps, disorientation?
Experiencing a nagging sense that you just aren't enough.
Riding a rollercoaster of wondering
whether you have worked too hard or not hard enough?
Feeling overwhelmed with worry and anxiety?
Looking for success and fulfillment as the world sees these things?
Keeping score of your life by looking for the approval of others?
Aching with sorrow or bowed down with guilt and shame?
If you recognize any of those things in your life
then you probably know what its like
to search for meaning and purpose in the exterior world.

Those things and thousands like them
are all symptoms of our human condition.
True, they reveal legitimate and authentic needs and desires;
we all need to be seen, valued, and loved.
We all need to be accepted, included, and part of a community.
In a strange, misguided way they also reveal
our longing for the holy, the transcendent,
for something outside of and beyond ourselves
that we cannot give to or do for ourselves.

They also, however, disclose what we treasure
and to what or whom we have given our hearts.
They are the symptoms of having lost ourselves.
They are the symptoms of disorientation;
lost on a path away from God.

Searching in the exterior world is risky business.
We risk not finding our true selves.
We risk eventually finding out
we are not who we thought we were—
in our own eyes or the eyes of the world.
As painful as those experiences might be,
they are opportunities for grace.
They are opportunities to discover who we are in God—
not in the eyes, opinions, praises, or approval of the world.
And it's a first step in our journey toward new orientation.
Like the proverbial prodigal son,
it is the first step in coming to yourself
and making the journey home.

But Lent is not the journey from bad to good,
or sinner to saint.
It is the journey of coming to ourselves,
learning and re-learning which way to turn,
and returning home to God.
So, we need, then, to take care
that the very things we give up, take on, or do for Lent
don't become our Lenten treasures to which we give our hearts—
in other words, an end in themselves.
Rather, we do well to remember that our practices and disciplines
are about teaching and helping us
to give our hearts to God and to one another.
And to remember they are not the means God's acceptance,
approval or love.

So what are your treasures?
To what or whom have you given your heart?
In what direction are your treasures taking your life?
Which treasures are truly of value and
which ones are only fool's gold?
Where has your searching in the exterior world taken you?
Are you on a path of disorientation in need of a new orientation?

Don't be afraid to reflect on and answer those questions.
Instead of right or wrong answers, however,
there may be truthful and less than truthful answers,
honest and less honest answers,
answers that keep us stuck and disoriented,
and answers that can free us to move forward to the new.
Where we begin our Lenten journey
is not as important as where it takes us.
In the same way, what we give up, take on, or do for Lent
are not as important as what those things do for us.

Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.
And don't worry if your spirit is troubled and heart is broken.
A troubled and broken heart God does not despise.

Prayer that you may keep your heart open.
Let the cross of ashes and the sacred words you hear,
reorient you as we begin this journey of new orientation
from darkness to light, from death to life.
Remember God does wonders with dust and ashes!

My prayer for each of us (and for the world) is
that God's word to us will be our greatest treasure
and will restore to us the joy of God's salvation.