

Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2021

You can view this service on YouTube at
<https://youtu.be/ahFggD1W3iE>

Sermon: The Rev. Carol Ruthven

Conversion of Hearts

It was almost exactly one year ago on March 6 when the first positive case of the coronavirus was reported in Kentucky. Since that fateful day we have been on an agonizing yearlong journey in which the reality of death has been at the forefront of the news and has weighed heavily on our hearts and minds. On this Ash Wednesday, perhaps more than any other Ash Wednesday, we are keenly aware of our own mortality. The sin and brokenness in our world has been painfully revealed in the huge gap in wealth between the rich and the poor, the suffering of millions who have lost their jobs and who are suffering from hunger and homelessness, and the glaring reality and devastating impact of systemic racism. This past year has revealed a lot and opened our eyes to untold suffering. We do not need ashes that mark the sign of the cross on our forehead to remind us of our sins and human mortality. Perhaps this year more than ever we need to be intentional in setting aside time to devote to pray to deepen our relationship with God and with one another. We need to embrace more fully the observance of a holy Lent.

We are invited to spend the next 40 days to devote ourselves to self-examination and repentance. We are encouraged to embrace the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, almsgiving, self-denial, and reading and meditating on God's holy Word. In our opening prayer dedicated to Ash Wednesday we ask God to create in us new and contrite hearts in order that we may confess our sins and obtain God's mercy for the forgiveness of our sins. Paul's plea to the Corinthians to be reconciled with God is echoed in the words of this prayer. Paul was calling for a conversion of heart. This requires a willingness to confess our sins and seek true repentance.

One might ask, "What does true repentance mean?" In one sense, it's quite simple. A priest speaking to a group of children began by asking the question: "What is meant by the word repentance?" A little boy raised his hand and replied, "Being sorry for something." Then a little girl at the back of the room chimed in and added, "I think it's being sorry enough to quit." Paul perhaps more than any other person in the New Testament understood the meaning of this.

You will recall that Saul had been mercifully persecuting Christians and going house to house arresting men and women, binding them, and bringing them to Jerusalem for trial. He was present at the stoning death of Stephan, the first Christian martyr.ⁱ Saul was temporarily struck blind after his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. Jesus confronted him saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"ⁱⁱ After this encounter, Saul underwent a dramatic conversion of heart. His life was completely changed and this was reflected in his new name, Paul. Saul, the ruthless persecutor of Jesus and his followers became Paul the apostle, who devoted the rest of his life to travel throughout the known world at that time to spread the Good News of Jesus's Gospel.

I am reminded of the English seaman, John Newton. On May 10, 1748, when he was on a ship that nearly foundered in a storm, he committed his life to Christ. He became a Christian

and gave up swearing, gambling, and drinking. Although he observed the anniversary of his conversion on May 10th every year for the rest of his life, he did not turn his life around completely. He did not yet experience a conversion of heart. Newton was promoted to captain of a slave ship and he continued for several years to command ships bringing slaves from Africa to America.

Newton began studying Latin and the Bible. It was only after much soul-searching that he began to see the horrors of slavery. The evilness of the slave trade began to weigh on his conscience; he recognized his hypocrisy in claiming to be a Christian but continuing to profit from the slave trade. After a long spiritual struggle, he eventually abandoned the slave trade and became active in the anti-slavery movement in England.

Newton experienced a conversion of heart and succeeded in turning his life around. To use the words he composed for the famous hymn, Amazing Grace: "I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see. 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved; how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed!" As Newton deepened his relationship with God his life was transformed. He was later ordained as an Anglican priest and served in several parishes in the Church of England. Can you imagine how the 400-year history of our nation would have been dramatically different, if other slave traders had experienced the conversation of heart that had transformed John Newton's life.

During Lent, we are called to slow down, to take time for prayer and Bible Study. We are called to reflect on the ways in which we have sinned against God in thought, word, and deed and by what we had done and left undone.ⁱⁱⁱ We seek God's forgiveness and mercy by being truly sorry and humbly repenting. It's one thing to admit that we have sinned, but it is a much more difficult matter to be sorry enough to quit and change our behavior. True repentance and conversion of heart requires a complete turn around in our lives.

In a remote area in southwestern Kentucky called the Kentucky Bend the Kentucky border dips into Tennessee like a tiny finger. There is only one road that you can drive down that tiny finger of Kentucky and when you reach the end of the road you have to turn around to drive back.

Life in many ways is like this. From the moment we are born we begin the journey toward our eventual death. We are born into a world filled with abundant goodness, as well as sin and evil. We need to turn our lives completely around in order to be on the road build by God that leads us to that heavenly place of eternal salvation. Each of us has an opportunity to journey on the road build by God. But that journey requires us to turn toward God. For some like Paul, there is a dramatic and immediate conversion of heart. For others like John Newton the conversion of heart takes place over many years.

I suspect that most of us experience a conversion of heart over many years as we mature in our faith. We each make choices to turn our lives around to make sure that we are travelling on the road build by God. That conversion of heart deepens our relationship with God, with one another and with our neighbors. There are many different spiritual disciplines that facilitate this conversion of heart. Through daily prayer and meditation on God's holy Word, we draw closer to God and one another. Through almsgiving we draw closer to our neighbors, who are suffering and in need. Through fasting, we appreciate the suffering of those who are impoverished and hungry.

I imagine you know of someone who is going to give up smoking, chocolate, or caffeine as part of their Lenten discipline. While this may be good for their health, it will not bring them into closer relationship with God. I invite you to think about fasting in a different way. In fasting, we want to give up those things that interfere with our relationship with God and with others. We want to give up cynicism and despair. We want to give up blaming ourselves and blaming others. We want to give up doing or saying anything that prevent us from being loved by God and from loving God and our neighbor. If we adopt these forms of fasting, we will grow in our love of God and love of our neighbor, both of which are at the foundation of our faith.

As we grow in our love of God and others, we experience a conversion of heart. We understand that God's love for us is an unconditional gift that is freely given to us. We learn that God's mercy is infinite. We appreciate that it is only through God's amazing grace that our sins are forgiven and we are healed.

At this time when we cannot gather safely together, you are invited to use the ashes that were mailed to you. In our liturgy, when I will say, "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return," dap your finger in a bit of oil and in the ashes and sign the cross on your forehead. As you do this, make a commitment to embrace the spiritual disciplines of prayer, meditation on God's holy Word, fasting, and almsgiving during this 40-day journey through Lent. Be open to allowing God to convert your heart in ways that will be renewing and life-giving. And remember that it is only by the gracious gift of God that we are given everlasting life through Jesus Christ our Savior. We will wait patiently and prayerfully for Easter Sunday when will joyfully celebrate the resurrection which renews all life. Amen.

ⁱ Acts 8:1-3.

ⁱⁱ Acts 9:4.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Book of Common Prayer, "The Confession," p. 360.