

Sermon for The First Sunday in Lent
March 1, 2020
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Journeying the Way of Love through Lent - Turn



Over the course of Lent, I invite us, individually and collectively, to explore the *Way of Love* with the wider Episcopal community. The *Way of Love* is a Rule of life or a set of practices that are designed to both draw us closer to God and to shape us to be more like Jesus as we practice the love that Jesus practices. It is a pathway that exposes us to the Love of God and a pathway that forms us to be the Love of God.

On Ash Wednesday, I introduced the first of seven practices, *Rest* and I suggested that rest is what allows us to stop trying to be gods ourselves so that we can be vulnerable and available for God to be God.

Today, the first Sunday in Lent, we will explore the practice of *Turn* as the practice of pausing to listen and choose to follow Jesus. Turning is affirming our place as children of God, saying “God I belong to you.”

Baptism can be a monumental turn towards God, and in it includes the language of turning: One of the questions of the Examination of Candidates In the baptismal liturgy is: “Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior?”

On a daily basis we have options and opportunities to turn towards God and life or to turn towards evil and death. Sometimes the choice is easy, but sometimes the choice is so hard we don’t even realize we have a choice at all.

The beauty of turning towards God is that God is always calling us and is always present even before we make a first step in God’s direction. Turning is a response we make to God first loving us. This is grace, that God acts first. What holds us back from hearing God calling? There are many things that can get in the way of us.

The portion of the creation story that we read this morning teaches that SHAME can be one of those things that make us deaf to God’s voice calling us (Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7). Studying the

creation narrative, we are not told that the garden was perfect before the fall, while many of us have assumed this. Adam and Eve were likely never free from foibles and follies. Disregarding God's command to not eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of good and evil, was possibly not Adam & Eve's first act of disobedience or turn in the wrong direction. The difference is now, Adam and Eve are enlightened by what is Good and Evil, and with this knowledge comes Shame. They have always been naked but now they are ashamed by it. And shame leads them to hide from God.

It isn't necessarily our imperfections that keep us distant from God. But our shame, resulting from our actions, is what hinders us from turning back to God. Shame holds us back from seeking reconciliation in relationships, and from being restored from our mistakes. No problem is too big for God to heal, but if we're too ashamed to ask God to heal the problem, then it is the shame and not the problem that keeps us apart. Shame keeps us from turning and returning.

For some of us, it may be helpful to spend some time this week asking, "What am I too ashamed of, which causes me to not turn to God?" Or you may ask: "When God calls me to turn, what is God asking me to turn away from?" or "What are the temptations of my own desert experience?"

But for now, I would like us to ponder more about turning towards God. Turning towards God is done in both big monumental moments, like at a baptism, or starting a healthier lifestyle (such as turning away from workaholism), or making a first commitment to God and this Christian walk. But for some of us, we were baptised as infants, raised in the church, and we may feel like we've always been on this journey. For some of us, it is harder to define these pivotal moments. The truth is though that our relationship with God is as much defined by the daily choices as it is by the pivotal moments. And thank God it's a choice that never goes away no matter how many times we don't make the turn.

The daily choice to turn towards God, is the daily choice to claim God as God and then to journey with God in the Direction of God's Kingdom. It is making the affirmation in our heads, our hearts, and our lifestyles that: God is present, God is Love, and Living as God asks matters.

I went to a Christian liberal arts college. While I loved my time there, I also struggled in various ways. One struggle I had was with some of my peers. It seemed my peers could "talk the talk" really well. They could pray the most eloquent prayers in class. They could talk with enthusiasm about the importance of following scripture. I was always judging myself because I felt my prayers weren't adequate nor my theology as developed as theirs. But then as I got to know some of these super-Christians better, I found some appeared to have little integrity. They would judge harshly in one breath and then make unethical, unmoral, unkind choices the next. It all felt hypocritical and inauthentic.



At the same time I was a part of a local skydiving club. I would hang out with this rough around the edges, eclectic skydiving community many weekends. While most of them would not identify themselves as Christians, I found they were more kind and loving than those young Christian peers that challenged me. The skydiving community also was authentic, no one tried to hide behind a guise. They were real.

It was at that time that I asked myself, do I really want to continue to identify as a Christian? For I knew that if I was going to say "Yes," I was going to have to be all in. I was not willing to do it part way. I asked myself this question again and again for months. And finally I came to the conclusion, that yes, I did want to continue to do this whole christian thing, I was all in. This was a significant turning point for me. But I quickly discovered that it was a choice that I would continually have to make. Every day I have to ask, Am still I all in? And decide which way I want to turn.

There are times that we are called to turn towards God that will take us by surprise. But there are also daily disciplines that can train our hearts and minds to continually Turn towards God. To Build up muscle memory so to speak, so that habits are formed so that Turning becomes a natural extension of ourselves.

Lent may be a time, where we want to add practices in our own lives, to become more aware of, to be more intentional each day, of the choices we make to turn towards God.

Maybe the goal is to make the intentional daily turning to become as routine as brushing teeth or making coffee in the morning. It can be as simple as two minutes of prayer before getting out of bed in the morning, thanking God for the gift of a new day and asking for strength to serve God and neighbor well. If you sense that God is calling you to make this Lent penitential, then reading the confession or the penitential order in the Book of Common Pray may be a



helpful guide to daily turning. If remembering that you are loved is the area that you need help turning, then a daily reading of the Baptismal Prayers or Psalm 139 may support your turning. Through Lent, we will be offering regular services of communal worship and prayer, making some

of these services of Morning Prayer or Eucharist part of your weekly rhythm may be your turning exercise. Doing a simple daily Prayer of Examination at the end of your day, where you ask both where you noticed God's presence and where you failed at making the turn might be another resource to aid in turning (*Reimagining the Examen* app for smartphones is a great resource). These are just a few examples of regular practices of turning. What is the exercise of turning that God is inviting you to take on this Lenten season?

God is always walking in the garden, calling us to come close, may we find freedom from things like shame which hinder our ability to hear and turn towards God. Instead, may we continually orient ourselves in the direction of the One that Loves us first, so that we can continue the Journey, experiencing God's love and being God's love for others.