

21 January 2010 Sermon by The Rev. Deacon Annie Fritschner
"Breaking hearts of stone through repentance"
Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16
Romans 10:8b-13
Luke 4:1-13

First, let me thank you for your prayers and loving support for Shawnee and me while we were in India. It is hard for me to describe how supported and loved I felt half way around the world. I knew that you, my church family, and I were traveling together, and this really mattered to me.

Second, thank you for your financial support and prayers for the children in the hostel in Durgapur on the Shanti Griya campus. These children in the Child Development Center on the Bishop's compound were gathered from the poorest of the poor in the neighborhood, and they live a very full and simultaneously meager life which is richly enhanced by your prayers, letters and gifts. I am inviting each of you *personally* to make the pilgrimage or mission or discovery trip next January to meet these children face to face and to feel their love and to give them your love.

Seeing the face of Christ in those children has broken and rearranged my heart so I want to reflect on the text from Paul's Letter to the Romans today. "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." It is as true for us today as it was thousands of years ago.

We are all God's children. Rich or poor, black or white, Greek or Jew, smart, talented and good looking or not, with four cars, or no car or living in our car. We are all equal in God's eyes - equally loved by God - and created in God's own image. This basic tenet of Christianity is so hard for us to fathom because it is based on God's generosity of spirit, not our worth or success. God loves us because God loves us - NOT because of our resume. And God loves ALL of us, those whom we love and those whom we hate or don't like or disagree with.

If God is the God of the vast interstellar spaces then God's perspective is so broad and so vast that no differences can be perceived. When Frank Borman saw Earth from space on the Apollo 8 mission he stated, "The view of the Earth from the Moon fascinated me—a small disk, 240,000 miles away. It was hard to think that that little thing held so many problems, so many frustrations. Raging nationalistic interests, famines, wars, pestilence don't show from that distance."

And if God is Lord of our souls and hearts and minds, living and breathing deep within every heart - within every crevice of our soul - then no differences can be perceived from that depth either. In God's vision, we are all equally treasured children. But Paul goes even further declaring that those who call on the name of the Lord will be blessed with God's generosity. And although not all of us do call on or depend on God, we can at any time, turn back towards Christ.

This past Wednesday we had a cross of ashes imposed on our foreheads, not only to remind us that we are all dust and that no matter how successful or smart or lucky or wealthy, we will ALL return to dust, but also to remind us that we are members of the same body of Christ. We belong to Christ and are Christ's own. It can be hard to depend on Christ first when we have worked hard to achieve success in our work, in our family, in the community. Yet our American focus on human achievement can turn us away from the One who truly loves us. Rob spoke about Lent being a time of repentance not punishment, and I want to share a future Daily Practices chapter being written by our Bishop on the topic of repentance. I quote from the latest DRAFT;

“What is Repentance?”

Repentance is at the core of humanity's relationship with God. As humans, we have a dual nature. On the one hand, we are made in the image of God and have that divine spark within us always. On the other, we are sinful, willful, and forgetful. The Jewish tradition offers a story that makes this dualism clear. A rabbinic story is that ‘Every person should have two pockets. In one, there should be a note that says “For my sake was the world created.” In the second, there should be a note that says “I am dust and ashes.”’ Repentance is attending to both of these notes. We are dust because we are mortal. Therefore, because we live in time our knowledge is partial and our motives mixed with many fears and anxieties about our mortal, limited nature.

Our basic fears drive us to sin and, therefore, to need repentance. However, we are also God's beloved, and the note that says ‘For us the world is made’ reminds us of God's deepest desire for all God's children to flourish and find abundant life. Repentance is recognizing that desire and moving our feet toward wholeness.

Humans are pilgrims who seldom walk in straight lines. Our life is a series of wandering away from the straight path into the wilderness, or, to use the language of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, we leave home and find ourselves in the distant country, far from the land of grace. Conversely, our life is punctuated with moments of clarity where we recognize who we are in the eyes of God. In those moments we read the note that says ‘For us the world was created’ and that recognition of divine love for us by the God who knows our true time propels us to turn around and find the straight path that leads us home. This wandering and returning is never ending but occurs over and over again.

Repentance is about growth in our life in Christ.”

Where are your growing edges in Christ and how can Lent be a time of movement towards wholeness? Where does your heart need to be broken and rearranged?

I close with this prayer by Walter Brueggeman entitled "And then you":

*We arrange our lives as best we can,
to keep your holiness at bay,
with our pieties,
our doctrines,
our liturgies,
our moralities,
our secret ideologies,
Safe, virtuous, settled.*

*And then you....
you and your dreams,
you and your visions,
you and your purposes,
you and your commands,
you and our neighbors.*

*We find your holiness not at bay,
but probing, pervading,
insisting, demanding,*

*And we yield, sometimes gladly,
sometimes resentfully,
sometimes late....or soon.*

*We yield because you, beyond us, are our God.
We are your creatures met by your holiness,
by your holiness made our true selves.
And we yield. Amen.*