

Doing a 180°

Joel 2:12-13 (NRSV)

12 Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; 13 rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.

Isaiah 58:5-7 (MSG)

⁵ Do you think this is the kind of fast day I'm after: a day to show off humility? To put on a pious long face and parade around solemnly in black? Do you call *that* fasting, a fast day that I, God, would like? ⁶ "This is the kind of fast day I'm after: to break the chains of injustice, get rid of exploitation in the workplace, free the oppressed, cancel debts. ⁷ What I'm interested in seeing you do is: sharing your food with the hungry, inviting the homeless poor into your homes, putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad, being available to your own families.

Reflection:

In Sara Miles' book, *City of God*, she recounts a conversation with her priest in which he said, "Feelings are stupid. Jesus doesn't care if you feel guilty. Jesus wants you to change." That has always stuck with me because it's really just a re-wording of something my mom said to me a lot when I was a kid: "don't just say you're sorry; show me." Prattling on about my regret or guilt did nothing for her. What she wanted to see was changed behavior.

The prophet Joel tells us to rend our hearts, not our clothing. Our clothing is just our outward appearance — it's the way we present ourselves to others. Rending our clothing is nothing more than putting on a good face, saying, "I'm sorry" and then doing nothing else. Or worse, continuing to do the same thing and having to say, "I'm sorry" over and over again.

So what happens when we rend our hearts? Just as Leonard Cohen sang in Anthem, "There is a crack... that's how the light gets in," the grace of God is only able to get into our hearts when we rend them. When we tear them open in front of God with true contrition and an intention to change.

Sorry is about good manners. Repentance is about real change.

In his first Ash Wednesday homily after becoming pope, Pope Francis said that repentance is not about "vague intentions." The Hebrew word for repentance used in the Old Testament is *shuv*, which means "to turn." It's the same word that is used when someone makes a physical turn — when they are facing one direction and then turn to face the opposite direction. There's nothing emotional about it; it indicates action.

Like Joel, Isaiah critiques the kind of fast that consists of nothing more than outward shows of piety. Isaiah's demand that repentance is intertwined with action was given 2,800 years ago and is just as meaningful today. What a wake-up call. I know that I've acted with indifference instead of compassion. I know that I've ignored people who are in pain or hungry or lonely. I know that I've not been available to my own family. And I know that I've tried to absolve myself by

rending my clothing, not my heart. It is my prayer on this Ash Wednesday that God will work in my heart, making it more like Jesus', so that I will not be focused on myself, that my eyes will be opened to the people around me that I can show love to, and that my inertia will be replaced with action.

Prayer:

Merciful God, we confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart. We have failed to be an obedient church. We have not done your will, we have broken your law, we have rebelled against your love, we have not loved our neighbors, and we have not heard the cry of the needy. Forgive us, we pray. Free us for joyful obedience, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.