

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent: which in the words of our children's pastor, Melanie, is a sad and serious season. I thought it would be fitting to start out the reflection tonight with a confession.

I have never really gotten the whole "Lent" thing. It's always been a fairly vague and blurry practice in my mind.

The first time I participated in Lent was my 4th year of university. I decided to give-up something very dear to me: pizza. Not only was pizza the cornerstone of my diet, Wednesday Nights at Rudy's Pizzeria was the center of my social life. Not wanting to disrupt this Wednesday rhythm, I continued my practice of Wednesdays at Rudy's; only instead of a pizza, I ordered calzones.

Which is simply a pizza folded in-half.

The exterior of my order had changed, but the interior remained the same. I offer this confession as an illustration of misunderstanding the practice and season of Lent.

To better guard our hearts and minds against such misunderstandings, tonight we will start with a working definition of Lent, followed by a short study of our passage from Joel, and ending in a reflection on repentance.

I

Lent is the season before Good Friday and Easter. Lent is a time for the sad and serious parts of our faith: repentance, grief, lament, and fasting. Lent is a time when we pack away celebration, and reflect on sin. In the 40 days of Lent, we follow Jesus into the desert, into the desolate places of in our selves and our world as a way to prepare our hearts to both make sense why Jesus died, as well as to better celebrate the hope we have in His resurrection.

Allow me to indulge in a little domestic complaining as an illustration:

My house's dryer is fairly broke. It makes a loud whine every time something heavier than a sock is placed inside of it. There is nowhere in the house that is safe from it's cries. Usually I put in a

load of laundry and leave the house. This enables me to forget that the dryer is broke. If I were to stay in our basement, and sit through the 40 minutes of drying and screeching, the need for repair would be quite present in my mind. And when that repairman came, and the dryer ceased to groan it's labor, then the celebration of this repair would be greater because I did not try and escape the reality of the dryers brokenness.

In Lent we fast and lament to in order to be present to the brokenness of the world, to discover and feel our need for forgiveness and a savior.

II

In our first scripture passage, Joel wrote to a group of people who felt their needs deeply; they were a people who found themselves in a tough spot. There had been trouble in Judah and Jerusalem—locusts had eaten up all the grapes and grain. So, no wine and no bread—no wine and no bread made Judah a very desperate people.

Joel adds to that desperation, preaching that judgment day is close at hand—the Day of the Lord is near.

Joel calls on the people of Judah to repent; to return to the Lord with all their heart—with fasting, weeping, and mourning. Verse 13 asks the people to tear their hearts and not their garments.

The repentance the God required of Judah was a broken and contrite heart. To go along with the exterior acts of weeping and fasting should be an interior change—a heart broken and needing God.

Torn garments without a torn heart is the same as giving up pizza only to eat calzone.

Joel is telling the people of God that the way to prepare for the Day of the Lord, for the coming of God's kingdom, is to repent. This repentance is not just for the leaders—it is for the whole people. The repentance God wants involves the whole community to returning to the Lord: elders and

children, brides and grooms, priests and ministers—everybody. This repentance is meant to be a communal practice.

Joel's message of holistic repentance is urgent: the time to repent is now.

Joel's message is echoed in the New Testament, in a song we sing:

The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God has drawn near. Come let us repent and believe in the Gospel.

III

What does that repentance look like for us? I think you can look at repentance as having 3 parts; 3 main ingredients. The first is an acknowledgment of the reality of sin.

As we follow Jesus, we are quickly faced with the reality of our own brokenness, and the brokenness of the world. We are forced to acknowledge the reality of sin.

Part repentance means being mindful of our sin and brokenness. Repentance means taking sometime to listen to the high-pitch whine of the broken dryer; repentance means choosing not to ignore what we desperately want to ignore and escape.

Instead of ignoring our brokenness, repentance requires us to confess the ways we have sinned: the bad things we've done, and the good things we've left undone.

Repentance requires us to face uncomfortable realities: we have not loved God or our neighbors, we have been self-indulgent and ignored the exploitation of others, we have been judgmental, and we've participated in the spoiling of creation.

True repentance also requires us to acknowledge the we as a people are broken, and that means spending time listening to stories of injustice: stories murdered and missing women; of the

extreme over-representation of indigenous women in Canadian prisons; stories of violence, oppression, and racism.

And we as the church are meant to live this repentance and confession together—it's a communal thing. We confess our sins together—the youth and the 50+, the single and married, the pastors and the toddlers—we all gather together to repent and return to God.

As we are mindful of our brokenness, as we spend time with our sins in front of us, we are led to a second ingredient of repentance: an acknowledgment our need for a savior. To further belabor a metaphor: after we've listened to the squeals of a broken dryer we are convinced of the need for a repairman.

Repentance requires us to admit we are stuck. We are dead in our transgressions. We are in need of the gracious and merciful God to have pity on us and come to our rescue. Repentance means understanding our need for forgiveness.

When we acknowledge our sin and our need for a savior, we can turn from our sin towards our savior. This is the third element of repentance—the actually turning.

This turning part of repentance is the ingredient I believe is particularly present tonight. Ash Wednesday is a turning moment. At the beginning of Lent we go through exterior motions of repentance. We receive ashes as sign of contrition, and an acknowledgment of our finite-ness: we came from dust and we're going back to dust.

Ash Wednesday is also when we begin our individual fasts: from chocolate, meat, complaining or Netflix.

We offer these exterior gestures to cultivate an interior movement away from ourselves, and our sin, towards God who is gracious and compassionate. We do the outside motions to create an inward posture.

It's during this Lenten season of repentance that we take up practices that prepare our hearts for Good Friday and Easter Sunday—these practices are meant to prepare us for the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The grief of Jesus' death is more poignant when we've spent a season acknowledging the sin and brokenness in our world and us that led to that death.

The hope and celebration of Jesus' resurrection life is made more jubilant when we've spent a season acknowledging our complete stuck-ness, when we've cultivated a longing for salvation.

So, this Lent, let's not offer superficial repentance.

Let's not give up pizza only to eat calzones.

Let's not tear our garments while leaving our stone hearts numb and whole.

Let's not offer to God offerings that cost us nothing.

Instead let us prepare our hearts for the kingdom by choosing the path of repentance.

Tonight we receive ashes as an exterior sign of an inward movement towards the cross of Jesus, so that we may more fully participate in His resurrection life.

Amen.