



“Back to Reality”

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Ash Wednesday
Joel 2:1–2, 12–17 (NRSV)***

On Monday, I had to fly to Phoenix because I had an interview with the commission on ministry. I'm in-care for ordination with the Disciples of Christ in the Arizona region, and so they wanted to check on how I am doing at PSR, and are wondering if I have become UCC yet.

They asked me two questions which I think are among the hardest to answer in life: One is, “What are my strengths?” And the other is, “What are my growing edges?”

The answers to these questions do not come easily for me. After all, how often does one take the time to reflect on one's own personal weaknesses and strengths? Life doesn't allow much time to do this. There are too many things to do in one day, and one day is not enough time to complete the task. There is too much noise surrounding our contemporary way of living that makes it almost impossible to stop for a moment and think about these things.

Another thing that makes it hard to answer these questions is that personal feelings sometimes are difficult to address. If you take seriously these questions, the answer is not going to be superficial, and it is going to be hard to make an objective and critical judgment of one's own strengths, especially one's own growing edges. I think it's just easier to get involved in the business and clamor of daily life.

In some sense, the prophet Joel is telling the people to stop and rethink the future of the community. He's asking them to consider what their strengths and growing edges are.

Have you ever asked yourself those questions in an objective and critical manner? If we consider them, they are profound and powerful questions. These questions basically require us to identify who we are as persons, to identify how far we can get on our own, and where we need to slow down and ask for guidance and counseling.

If you haven't explored these questions yourself, or haven't reflected on them in a while, I think that Ash Wednesday is probably a good starting point for exploring them for the first time, or to probe them again. It's interesting that not long ago I didn't have a clue what Lent was. In Spanish the season of Lent is known as *Cuaresma*, and the literal translation for both English and Spanish don't match. So, when I think of the *Cuaresma*, I used to associate this season with the beach, *Carnaval*, and lots of sea food. But still I had no clue what *Cuaresma* or Lent meant, until now.

Catherine Gunsalus Gonzalez wrote an interesting article in her on-line lectionary resource about Lent titled, "*Preaching the Lenten Lectionary*". In her article she says that the origins of Lent are grounded in an ancient tradition that has roots in preparation of candidates for Christian baptism. The symbolic action of dying to a life of sin and being reborn into a new life in Christ was preceded by a process of reflection and repentance on the part of the candidate, which was followed by a complete turnaround in the life of that person as he or she became a new Christian.¹

Indeed, Ash Wednesday and the passage from the book of Joel that we just heard tonight are occasions that call us to repentance as individuals. The season of Lent is a period of time in our Christian calendar when we are called to confront and ask critical questions of ourselves, like what do we do well in life, and where do we fall short.

Often when I engage in interreligious dialogue, or simply with somebody who is not a Christian, I find that our tradition has some things that we need to confess, that there are things that took place in our history that we cannot or should not deny. For example, the way that the Spanish conquerors evangelized the natives wasn't the healthiest and most loving way to convert people to Christianity.

A distinctive aspect about Ash Wednesday, beyond the popular concept of repentance, is that repentance gives us as believer an opportunity to make our faith and religion seem more human to those who do not share our tradition. I think this occasion gives us the opportunity to present a Christian face to others that looks more like the rest of the world; not the typical happy face of the Christians, but one that is conscious of people who are mourning, hungry, and suffering in the world. This occasion gives us the opportunity to recognize that we as Christians are not perfect and that our institutions are not perfect. The most important thing about the occasion of Ash Wednesday, however, is that today is a day that ultimately points to forgiveness. The scriptures and liturgy associated with this day remind us that we have an opportunity to turn around and to change our ways.

An interesting feature in the scripture from Joel that we heard tonight is that the prophet is calling the whole community (not individuals) to reflection and repentance. Joel's approach is very different than the messages that we often hear in our society which focus on the individual.

¹ Gonzalez, Catherine Gunsalus, "Preaching the Lenten Lectionary: Year A," *Journal for Preachers*, 2008.

In keeping with Joel's approach, I invite us today to reflect—not only individually, but collectively—on the questions that the commission on ministry asked of me. I invite us to reflect on our strengths and growing edges as a community. And rather than rushing to answer these questions, I encourage us to let tonight and this season of Lent be a hushed time, a time for us to quietly reflect on these questions, and trust that the answers will surface in God's good time, and that God will guide our response to them. Most of all, I invite us to enter into this season gently and deliberately as we consider our strengths and growing edges, and prepare ourselves to receive God's abounding grace and steadfast love. Amen.