



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

February 10, 2016

"Realignment" - Ash Wednesday Service

The Rev. Steve Peich

As a kid I grew up in the Eastern Orthodox Church and in that church tradition we would always fast from meat every Friday throughout the year. But during Lent it was even stricter; we fasted every Wednesday and Friday. And then during the week before Easter (Holy Week) we fasted from meat *all week* and on Friday I even think we abstained from dairy products—so...no milk, eggs, cheese pizzas, etc. By the time we got to Easter, we were eating cardboard!

But here's the thing: I think we missed the whole point of fasting and Lent. You see, in my home there was often a lot of cussing and swearing, screaming and yelling at each other. And all the fasting in the world never seemed to slow that stuff down. We demeaned and trashed each other as a family all the time—but at least we didn't eat meat on Friday!

I think we were missing the forest for the trees about Lent because we ended Lent the same kind of people as we started it—only skinnier.

One of the great things about the Lenten season is that it is a time where there is a greater intentionality about facing things in our lives. Facing things that still need Easter; facing things that still need the salvation of Jesus, things that still

need the healing of Jesus. Facing things of which we still need to repent.

In our modern world not everyone is keen on the idea of repentance, maybe because it conjures up pictures of people beating up on their sense of self worth, thus making repentance some sort of act of self-loathing.

But in reality repentance is necessary because we are people of infinite worth. It is something we do so that we can we can actually live into the greater worth and value which God has ordained for our lives. That's why we take time to repent.

Repentance was a common theme in the preaching of Jesus. In Matthew 4:17 (and in other gospels), the writer summarizes Jesus' message that He preaches everywhere like this: *"Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand."* Because it is so central to Jesus' teaching, it is important for us to really understand the issue of repentance.

Briefly speaking, what is repentance? Repent is not simply, "Don't do bad things anymore," or "Feel really bad about the bad things you did do."

Repentance, first of all, is to

RE-Consider your whole way of living; to take a long, loving look at the reality of the condition of your life. It's to RE-Think the identity and the world we have created outside of God's values, purposes, and image.

And then it is to take what we see and RE-Align all the aspects of our life with the reality of the Kingdom of God. Re-Align and Re-Focus our lives to be more in line with *God's* values and vision, purpose and passions, plans and perspective of others in our world, etc. And part of Re-Alignment is to begin to RE-Build your identity and your world with Jesus' vision for life.

To put it succinctly, repentance is to RE-Consider and RE-Think and RE-Align and RE-Build *everything* on the basis of Jesus.

Let me add this: Repentance is not a point. It's a pathway. Repentance is to soulful and relational health like jogging is to physical health. You don't just jog once and then your good. There needs to be *regularity* to your jogging in order to experience a truly healthy life.

One time jogging will not get you in shape because your body is constantly experiencing things that make jogging necessary—again!

As each day and week go by, your body falls off a bit off from the last time you jogged. So you need to jog again.

So too with your heart, mind, and soul. They are constantly experiencing things that make repentance necessary—again.

When we come to Christ we may be free of sin's condemnation but not necessarily its habit, which means we need to deal more intentionally with sin, and other things that are broken in our lives, on a *regular* basis.

To put it a little differently, repentance is part of the pathway that moves us forward (not backward into feeling terrible or shameful) toward the abundant life Christ spoke of. In the gospel of John, when Jesus gave one of the reasons He came to earth. He said, "I have come so that you may have life, and have it *abundantly*."

I like John Ortberg's comment on Jesus' magnificent statement here. Ortberg says, "We forget that Jesus never said, 'I have come that you might do okay.' Okay is not okay."

Ever think of it that way? Okay walks with God; Okay marriages; Okay parenting; or Okay friendships. Okay is not okay. This is part of the reason why we formulate church traditions like Lent. It gets us to spend a good chunk of time intentionally reflecting on and recalibrating the "Abundant Life Meter," which may be dropping down to "Okay" levels (or even worse).

This why I now want to turn our talk tonight to the issue of our Inner Life. If we are going to thrive as Christians and have an impact for God in the world, then we really need

to have our inner life in order. I've never heard anyone ever say, "I have such a vibrant walk with God and my inner life is a train wreck."

Now because my inner life is invisible it is easily overlooked or neglected or ignored. Again John Ortberg makes a keen observation about this issue. He says, "(You) cannot have an impactful life with an impoverished soul. Soul neglect is the greatest spiritual epidemic of our time, and people with neglected souls rush through life disconnected from God and dis-integrated within themselves. When the soul is understood and attended to, we can be liberated from hurry, preoccupation, unsatisfied desires, and chronic discontent."

And a big part of what keeps us "okay" or worse is this *Soul Neglect*, this *Disconnect* from God, this *DIS-integration* of our inner lives from the presence, purposes, and passions of Jesus.

And it is this Soul Neglect and DIS-integration that leads to unfortunate statistics like this: Studies show that 85% of Christians admit to being stuck in their walk with Christ (Peter Scazzero). In other words they are simply not thriving or growing in the intimacy with Christ, nor in their kingdom impact in the world.

You want to grow and change, but for some reason it seems like you cannot get past certain things in life. You can't quite get over your anger, your struggles with lust, or insecurity, being defensive, or those nagging bad habits, etc.

Or you can't quite find the discipline necessary to study the Word in an in-depth manner, pray,

serve others or step up to disciple others. Anyone know what I'm talking about? Anyone ever feel a bit stuck soulfully?

Even though you have a quiet time and go to church faithfully, there is still a kind of glass ceiling between you and the next level of growth and change. This is why as we proceed this evening, I want you to have Psalm 51:6 playing like a song you can't get out of your head. It says, "*Surely You desire truth in the innermost being, and in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom.*"

Innermost being, pertains to the deepest and centermost part of a person; the core of who you are. *The hidden part* refers to the place we usually seal off, keep secret, and hide from others and the world. And the psalmist realizes that God wants two things in those deep, inner, and hidden places: Truth and Wisdom.

Truth is that which corresponds with and conforms to *reality*. In other words, in the inner most parts there is to be no self-deception or falsehood; no denial, no minimizing, rationalizing or making excuses; no phoniness or pretense in the core of our being. Just reality. *God's Reality*, *God's Truth*, about you, about life, about others, about power, about sex, about everything in the core of who you are.

When we live this way our lives are no longer stuck, they thrive. Make sense?

Unfortunately, there is no way we are going to cover tonight all that pertains to getting unstuck, but let me bring up just a few things that can make a big difference.

First let me say this, as a pastor for over 30 years I have learned from my own life and from counseling hundreds of others that one of the chief obstacles to bigger souls and deeper relationships and having a great impact for God, is what some call our *Shadow*.

As pastor and writer Peter Scazzero, put it: "Your shadow is the accumulation of untamed emotions, less than pure motives and thoughts that, while largely unconscious, strongly influence and shape your behaviors. It is the damaged but mostly hidden version of who you are."

So long as these things remain in the innermost parts, there is no room for truth, no room for wisdom, no room for the abundant life.

Perhaps the writer of Psalm 51 understood this about the human condition, that it has a great proclivity for the development of shadows in the "hidden places" of our lives.

Now it needs to be pointed out that shadows manifest in various ways. Sometimes they manifest in obvious sinful behaviors, but they also manifest in the more subtle forms. In fact, sometimes the shadow shows up in good-looking stuff.

For example, to the outer world it looks like we are committed to excellence, but really in the inmost parts, in the deep hidden parts, it's *Perfectionism* and the starving ache for *Affirmation*.

It looks like *Diligence* but really in the inmost parts, in the deep hidden parts, it's *Drivenness*. It looks like servanthood but really it's *People Pleasing*. It looks like *Graciousness*

but really it's *Conflict Avoidance*. You get the idea. They look the same on the outside, but only you and the Lord know what the truth is.

The thing I want you to note is that things like drivenness and conflict avoidance, people-pleasing, etc. have fear based, anxiety based, shadow based motivations.

For example, I love doing research and study when I prepare for a talk. It comes out of a genuine love for learning and the joy of stretching my mind and creativity to new places. *But* if I go into those deep places, I can also see shadows lurking in some of my inner most parts. I can also see the shadows of shame and the fear of rejection and the fear of failure lurking around; that gnawing feeling that I have to prove my worth to others again and again; that fear that I'm only truly worthy of love and respect *if* I perform well.

This is why the shadow of perfectionism, for example, is hard to uproot, because in a twisted way there is a pay off to it. Not only do people give you accolades for your "perfect" work, but we also start to believe deep down that if we do an awesome job of something—all the time—we don't have to fear being rejected or being shamed.

Of course this sense of relief only lasts for about an hour, then the Shadow whispers again, "But can you do that good a job again? If you don't, you know what will happen. You'll lose your job, you'll be rejected, you'll be a failure."

Can anyone relate?

And this is why we need to do as the writer of this proverb says in

Proverbs 14:8 – "*The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways.*" *Give thought* here means to *look closely* at something. In other words we need to be very intentional about looking deep and consider our ways on a regular basis. If not, shadows will arise and drive your life.

So this "giving thought" to our ways, looking deep into our lives, is a big part of what needs to be infused into whatever spiritual discipline you choose to do during Lent.

If you choose to do some sort of spiritual discipline like fasting during Lent, please remember this: The goal of any spiritual discipline is to give God the space, time, and attentiveness to be changed by Him.

So for example, the goal of fasting is not simply to go without food but to give God the space, time, and attentiveness to be changed by Him as we hunger, as we use our time to pray instead of eat.

Or if you are going to practice more silence over Lent, remember the goal of silence is not simply to go without words, but to give God the space, time, and attentiveness so that we might be changed by Him in our silences.

So here's the deal for us to live free of our shadows, we need to do several things as we "*give thought to our ways*" and repent. I briefly touched on them in a sermon a while back, but it may be worth repeating here and expanding on them so that we have a good purposeful game plan for Lent, and so that at the end of Lent we are not the same people who entered it.

To defeat our shadows and repent well - we need to: Face, Embrace, Trace, Replace, Relate.

Face. What I mean here is taking a long, loving look at the reality of who we are and how we are relating to others. It is to take a loving inventory of your life and relationships. Remember, God desires truth in our inmost being, so be *strenuously honest* about every aspect of your life: your thoughts, your emotions, your behaviors, habits, lusts, and anger, as well as your relationships, your intimacy (or lack thereof), or how you are in your loneliness.

This is key because as various writers have pointed out over the centuries, we can't fix what we don't face. We can't defeat what we deny.

If I don't face things then everyone else around me will be wearing what I may not be facing or fixing, be it my anger, bitterness, shame, lack of boundaries, whatever. The point is everyone at work or home or small group etc. will feel them because shadows always leak out.

By the way, when you look at your life with a strenuous honesty, always make sure it's drenched with grace. No one ever grew into greater spiritual health by beating themselves over the head with a verbal stick.

Always remember as you do this kind of thing, the truest thing about you is *not* your shadows. The truest thing about you is that you are a child of God, loved with an unbreakable love, and created for a divine purpose. No shadow can ever take even one ounce of those truths away from you. We may not always live into them, but they are true about you nonetheless.

Now what you Face and Find, you need to **Embrace** it, own it, and take responsibility for what is there.

As I often teach people: "Don't B Dr. Me." Don't Blame, Deny, Rationalize, Minimize, or Excuse your actions, thoughts, or emotions.

Ever see a situation where someone points out a shadow and the other person responds to it with some sort of blame or excuse?

For example, when a spouse confronts the other spouse for speaks harshly to them or the kids; they respond with, "Well if you didn't mess up I wouldn't have to yell." That's *blame* (viz. its your fault that I'm yelling).

Or when we say "No, I'm not angry; I'm just tired, okay?!" That's *denial*.

Or when someone confronts another about their drinking and the one confronted says, "Gimme a break. I had a really rough day at the office." That's *rationalizing* (and its close cousin, *entitlement*).

When we blame, deny, rationalize, minimize, or excuse our emotions and actions we stay stuck in our spiritual growth.

Next, we **Trace** it. Reflect deeply on what may be beneath our actions and emotions. What's really beneath our busy schedule (e.g. why do I keep saying yes to too many things?) or our avoidance of conflict? What's really feeding our coldness to others and anger. Am I feeling anxious, hurt, feeling rejected, or disrespected? Sometimes our shadows can be traced back to fears and anxieties; like the fear of failure or the fear of rejection or even

shame. Or sometimes it is old hurts that never were healed in our families.

Replace. This is where we replace what is there in the inner most parts with God's Truth, God's Healing. Again remember the deepest truth about you is not your shadow. The truest thing about you is that you are a child of God, loved with an unbreakable love, and created for a divine purpose. And we need to replace the junk we find with these realities.

I remember a time when I really struggled with shame. Shame is that gnawing feeling that you are not worthy of love and connection unless you do or have something "worth loving."

In my late 30's I was feeling crushed under the weight of this mindset. And I remember going to a park to meditate on the scriptures. I read slowly and repeatedly read the words of God the Father at the baptism of Jesus, "*This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.*"

As I absorbed and internalized that reality about me, that I too am God's son in whom He is well pleased, tears started to flow because this is what I longed to hear from my own family. And I twisted my life in knots for decades just to solicit those words from them.

I could trace my sense of shame to my family's shame messages when I grew up and from that day forward I really turned a corner. I began a journey out of being driven by shame and started to live more deeply in the truth of God about my life.

Now what I also mean by Replace is to take right actions to clean out the shadows. We need to be proactive in the process of getting un-stuck. For example, you can confess sin, ask for forgiveness, seek out prayer from the prayer team, meet with an accountability partner or Stephen minister, or get counseling, talk to a pastor, etc. Confess and speak the truth to others about your sin, anxiety, hurt, fears of rejection, etc.

This relates to the last piece of getting “unstuck” and moving toward the abundant life that Easter provide. And that is, **Relate**. This means that it is best to go through this whole process with a trusted soul friend or soul friends. We can never become all that God intends for us by ourselves. We are intentionally designed to be inadequate to create a vibrant life on our own. You are hardwired to need others in order to live well.

We need to deal with all the brokenness we discover with other trusted people because, as they say in AA, “We are as sick as the secrets we keep.” Very often its our hiddenness that’s perpetuates our struggle. Or to put another way, what stays hidden stays hurting.

Listen to Christian counselor and writer Larry Crabb as he talks about the place and importance of community. “A spiritual community, a church, is full of broken people who...journey together with their wounds and worries and washouts visible, but are able to see beyond the brokenness to something alive and good, something whole.”

Can you be that community for others during Lent? Because the reality is that nearly all of us carry around in our souls deep secrets, dark

fears, disturbing doubts, and stories of shame but have no one and no place to speak fearlessly about these things; no person with whom we can be completely transparent.

And so, as a result, the secrets, the fears, the sin, and the shame in the innermost and hidden places, remain in us, which can often cause us to walk, sometimes for decades, with a spiritual-limp and a worn down soul.

How many people in this service, in this church, in the community need that place of safety and trust? The place you can provide for others to simply speak fearlessly the shadows they carry—the worries, the fears, the sin, and shame.

So again as you go through Lent, try using this practical game plan for change so we do more than abstain from meat or chocolate, etc., but that we become people who are changed to the core of our innermost being and we end up different people at the end of Lent than the way we started.

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Note: Sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: fpchkoolau@gmail.com