

WHAT SHALL WE DO?

a sermon praught by the Rev'd Gerald Keucher
in the church of St Mary, Staten Island, New York,
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**In the Name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Ghost: AMEN.**



ASH WEDNESDAY AND LENT are about repentance and conversion. But don't tune me out because I've just used those very loaded words. Bear with me for just a few minutes, and see if what I am going to say can make those words relate to your experience and mean something.

Lent began as a time to give converts to the Faith an intensive preparation for being baptized at Easter. Lent is about repentance, but repentance is not the uncomfortable, self-conscious, shallow apology that we often think it is.

In a marriage repentance is *not* saying we're sorry for leaving the dishes undone. Repentance is not even saying we're sorry for cheating on our spouse. Repentance means that awareness we sometimes have that our relationship with our spouse means more to us than we can say — the awareness that our lives would be terribly diminished by the loss or departure of that spouse. Repentance means a true awareness of what our priorities and commitments are.

It is very natural that repentance has come to be tied to saying we're sorry, because it's often only when we've disappointed or betrayed someone that we realize how important that relationship is to us. But repentance is not saying we're sorry. Repentance is the realization of how important the person is to us that makes us *want* to say we're sorry.

Lent is also about conversion. And conversion is really making our actions conform to what we have realized is important to us. Once we've really realized that we really *want* to be married to our spouse, we'll act in ways that preserve and strengthen that relationship, and we'll give up acting in ways that impair and destroy the relationship.

Martin Smith of the Cowley Fathers in Boston tells of a Russian novel in which the hero is asked what he does for a living. Smith writes, "The question astonishes and offends him. 'What? What do I *do*? Why I'm in love with Olga!'" To the character in the novel, the important question is not about what he does, but who he is. The question is not about his actions but about his identity. "He is a man in love, and that is who he understands himself to be." He doesn't answer the question that has been asked; he answers the question that should have been asked.

Smith writes, "The question that should be put to all at the beginning of Lent is not, 'What shall we do?' The right question is the one to which the answer is, 'Why, I'm in love with God!'"

A good Lenten practice might be to say these words quietly and regularly. "I am in love with God." We may find we're shy about making this claim. Lots of us are shy about making this assertion even about another person. "I'm in love with my wife."

“I love my friend.” Maybe we’re shy because as soon as we make this claim, we realize that our love is often half-hearted or self-centered. But we’re here tonight because there’s a place in us that, in spite of everything, *wants* to return God’s love. We are people who want to love God back.

What we do flows from who we are. We know this very well about other people. We know angry people, and we can predict that their actions will express that anger. We know kind and generous people, and we know that we can count on their kind and generous actions.

We can know the same things about ourselves. Repentance is realizing who we are and what we really want. Conversion is acting in accordance with our true desires.

When we know who we are, then we’ll know what to do. Repentance means recognizing our desire for God — recognizing our desire to love God back. If we see that that’s why we’re really here, then we can start to be converted — we can start to build a life around our desire to love God back.

That’s not always easy. Even if we recognize and can say that we’re in love with our spouse, there are still the dishes to be washed and occasions of betrayal to be avoided. But once we know what we really want, it becomes much easier to recognize and refuse what we *don’t* want, and to give our primary relationships what they need in order to thrive.

The heart of repentance is the realization that “I’m in love with God.”

The heart of the converted life can be glimpsed in this poem in which Richard Hayden writes of his childhood in the early years of the last century in a house with a coal furnace:

*Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold.
Then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.
I’d wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he’d call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,
speaking indifferently to him
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love’s austere and lonely offices?*

All of our important relationships — including our relationship with God — are a combination of those two things: first repentance — the realization of what we really want and how important the relationship is to us; and second, conversion — the sometimes austere and lonely actions that the relationship of love demands.

Have you given up something for Lent, or have you decided to take something on? Maybe you can tell yourself and God over and over that you are in love with God, and that's why you're not eating candy, or that's why you are reading the Bible every day.

And while you're reminding yourselves of who you are, like Richard Hayden's father, you can devote yourselves willingly and faithfully to love's offices. They might sometimes seem austere and lonely from the outside, but we will feel within us the warmth of desire for God that causes us to *want* to do them.

**In the Name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Ghost:
Amen.**



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The cover shows one of Christianity's most disturbing image of the lover of God who disastrously betrays his Lord, and then repents: Rembrandt's 1660 oil of *Peter Denouncing Christ*, now in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.