

“That is what Lent is all about”

For many Christians, repentance is a hard word. Whether you were reared in an evangelical tradition or mainline tradition repentance is scary. It conjures images of medieval monks whipping themselves with knotted cords, saints starving themselves in lengthy fasts, or something creepy from a Dan Brown novel. This is all in an effort to purge their bodies of fleshly urges or punish themselves for wicked thoughts. To most modern people mortification of the flesh seems superstitious at best and masochistic at worst. We question how causing ourselves pain gets us closer to God.

Our sense of repentance is flawed. The Greek word translated as repentance is *metanoia* (μετάνοια). The literal meaning of *metanoia* is “to turn around,” or “to change one’s mind.” Turning around or changing my mind might not be easy, but physical pain and self-abuse are not part of the process. When we are driving and we get going in the wrong direction we turn around to get back on course. When we make a mistake in our thinking or judgement we change our mind in order to be thinking rightly again. We may have to ask for forgiveness or express regret, but these do not involve whips or starvation.

The point of repentance and the season of Lent is a reorienting of our life towards God. Over the centuries the church’s suggested responses have been the spiritual disciplines of fasting and reading scripture. Regardless of what we do, the point is the reorientation. Even the greatest of saints experienced distance from God, dark nights of the soul, unanswered prayers, or confusion about their calling. Each of them tried in their own way to break through the barrier in order to open up the pathway and be focused on God more clearly.

We can also have a variety of responses to get us reoriented, but a half-hearted giving up of chocolate or a reluctant reading of scripture won’t cut it. What is first required is an honest assessment of what is obstructing or impeding our relationship with God. Once we have clearly focused on that we have a clue as to what is needed.

When I was driving in France a few years ago I got in a bind. With the gas gauge sitting on empty I could not find a gas station anywhere. I was stuck in rush hour traffic, on the narrow streets of a small city and at my wit’s end. As I rounded a corner I saw a small parking lot in front of a shop. I pulled in realizing my continual driving was fruitless. My French is not very good, and neither was the florist’s English. But we communicated well enough for her to direct me to a filling station. Once I stopped beating myself up and took a chance on communicating I was able to get on the right course.

The metaphor may be clumsy, but if we never try to communicate we will be driving around in circles not knowing that the solution is near at hand. We have to take a chance, get our knees dirty and try to discover where the blockage is. Only then can we get back on course and direct our whole self toward God.

To paraphrase Linus Van Pelt, “That is what Lent is all about, Charlie Brown.” Reorienting our whole life toward the one who created us, loves us, and cares for us throughout all our days in this world and the next.