

Hands of Repentance

Joel 2:12-19 (NIV)

¹² “Even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.” ¹³ Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. ¹⁴ Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing— grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God. ¹⁵ Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. ¹⁶ Gather the people, consecrate the assembly; bring together the elders, gather the children, those nursing at the breast. Let the bridegroom leave his room and the bride her chamber. ¹⁷ Let the priests, who minister before the LORD, weep between the portico and the altar. Let them say, “Spare your people, LORD. Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’ ” ¹⁸ Then the LORD was jealous for his land and took pity on his people. ¹⁹ The LORD replied to them: “I am sending you grain, new wine and olive oil, enough to satisfy you fully; never again will I make you an object of scorn to the nations.

This last Sunday in our first Bible reading, we heard that Elisha tore his garments when he saw Elijah carried away in a whirlwind accompanied by chariots of fire. This action is recorded several times in the Bible as a way to express grief and mourning. Different time; different culture. Because when I think of someone “rending their garments,” I can only picture Hulk Hogan at the height of Hulkamania entering the ring and then tearing his yellow shirt in two to show how strong and powerful and pumped he was for the match. That “rending of the garments” was an anger thing, a strength thing.

Even though we don’t rend our garments in grief, this doesn’t mean that we don’t know how to express grief at all. Most of the time we associate grief with crying, sadness over the thing that has happened. It used to that someone would wear a black armband when they were mourning a loss, especially of a friend or a teammate. But that’s not the only reason believers would rend their garments in grief.

Old Testament believers would tear their garments, sometimes dump ashes on their head or even sit in them, to show how much it grieved them when they or someone else had sinned. There was often weeping and sometimes a fast associated with this grief over sin. I don’t know that we have an equivalent sign of grief over our sins, a physical showing of repentance. Maybe it’s the spouse saying, “I’ll go sleep on the couch” when they know that they have done something so wrong that they are not worthy to share the bed with their husband or wife, but that’s not on display for the public to see. We don’t really have a universal visual symbol of repentance here in our culture, do we?

Maybe our symbol is the one that we’re using today. We smear the ashy remains of the burned palm branches used in previous worship services on your forehead or hand. You can see it on your hand, but you can’t see it on your forehead. Instead, you get those lingering looks as people wonder whether or not they should tell you that you have dirt on your forehead. But as you received those ashes, you heard that from dust you are and to dust you will return. By wearing these ashes, you are saying that I am a sinner. I deserve death because of the sins I myself have committed. I don’t say this proudly. I say this as I am nothing but dust and ashes. I am sorry for my sins, humbled by them. I can’t save myself from death – physical or spiritual. I can’t stop my death from happening. Forgive me. Save me!

Like any action done by our hands, it can be done just for show and lose its meaning. The Lord tells his people, “Rend your heart and not your garments.” (verse 13) He’s saying that he doesn’t want his people to go through the motions of showing that they’re sorry, as they did when they rent their garments or like how the kid who hit his brother or sister reluctantly says, “I’m sorry,” and you know he’s not. God wants his people to mean it, to be sorry for their sins, to actually want to change on the inside in order to change on the outside – that a change of your heart would change the actions of your hands. Show that you’re sorry inside and out.

What would the hands of the Israelites do to show that they were rending their hearts and not just their garments? They would fast. They would weep. They would mourn. They would call a special assembly, a special church service. No one was to be exempt from it. The elders, all the retirees have to come. Children, including infants still nursing, were not excused from attending because of their age or inability to get themselves there. Even the newly married couples were supposed to postpone any kind of honeymoon and instead be there for this service to show the change in their hearts. Then the priests would intercede on behalf of the people, praying that God would spare all of them from their sins even though they don’t deserve it.

Again, sounds like what we're doing tonight. We have gathered together for a somber Ash Wednesday worship in the middle of the week when you are normally wrapping up supper, sitting down to a little relaxing before going to bed. The call for this special day of worship went out for young and old, parents and children, newlywed and veteran married couples, to teachers as well as students. We're all here marking our bodies to show that we are sorry for our sins and need God to spare us from our impending deaths.

We do this for Ash Wednesday, but after service you're going to wash off those ashes. So, the Lord's statement to the believers in Joel's day comes back to us. Have we rent only our garments today by putting on ashes or have we also rent our hearts in sorrow over our sins? Have we only put a visible mark of repentance on our body today for a show to other people that I'm religious or have I looked into my heart, grieved over my sins, and wanted to tear it in half because of them? Am I changed in my heart or am I just going through the motions of this holy day?

I cannot read your hearts. What you present is all that I see. If you come here and have me smear ashes on your forehead or hand, if you say along with me a confession of your sins, I take it at face value. I believe that you have rent your heart and not just come for appearance's sake. But you examine your heart. You know if today is just show, whether your hands are going through the religious motions or not. I can't read your heart, and that's fine. I don't need to because I'm not your judge. God is.

Now that's the scarier thought, isn't it? Pastor and other people here can't see your heart and whether you are actually and genuinely sorry for your sins, wishing to change your life, and wanting to return to the Lord or not. But God can and does see that. He knows whether what you're doing with your hands today is just a show, whether or not the ashes mean anything to you, whether you actually intend to turn from the sins of your hands. God knows every thought you have, why you do each action that you take. You can't hide anything from him. We are all laid bare before God and he will judge us knowing everything we have ever done, said, and thought.

Just as the Israelites were in Joel's day, we are completely exposed before God. So we join their prayer, "Spare your people, LORD. Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'" (verse 17)

Today, we use our hands to rend our hearts as well as our garments, metaphorically speaking. We take this time of worship as an opportunity to take God up on his call, "Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing— grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God." (verses 13-14) We return to the Lord with our hearts and hands of repentance because he is calling us.

Return to the Lord because although he can read our minds, he doesn't try to get us to read his mind. He tells us exactly how he will operate. As Joel prophesied: "Then the LORD was jealous for his land and took pity on his people. The LORD replied to them: 'I am sending you grain, new wine and olive oil, enough to satisfy you fully; never again will I make you an object of scorn to the nations.'" (verses 18-19) Rend your heart with hands of repentance and return to the Lord because he is gracious and compassionate. He wants to forgive. He tells us multiple times that when we repent, he does in fact forgive. He will satisfy us and actually change our hearts. Then our hands of repentance will follow suite.

Lord, today we are not here for show. Rend our hearts, as only you can and as only you can see. Move our hands to live the repentance, the change of heart, that you have caused in us that our signs of repentance would not just be for today, but that you would make lasting changes with our hands. Return us to you through your Holy Spirit and his Word to satisfy us with your compassion and forgiveness. Amen.