

From the Pulpit of the Japanese Baptist Church of North Texas
February 7, 2016

Return to God

Joel 2:12-18

2:12 "Yet even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;

2:13 and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.

2:14 Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD your God?

2:15 Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly;

2:16 gather the people. Consecrate the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her chamber.

2:17 Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep and say, "Spare your people, O LORD, and make not your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'"

2:18 Then the LORD became jealous for his land and had pity on his people.

Lent starts from Wednesday of this week. In Early Church, Lent was the preparation period, praying and studying the Bible for the upcoming baptism in Easter. Those who had already been baptized spent this period looking back their own baptism. During Lent, they looked back at the Cross of Jesus Christ, which was the foundation of the faith, and repented and examined their faith. We would like to follow the ancient Christian's way during the season of Lent. But to do so, we would like to be more familiar with the Bible and reserve

more time for prayers. I think that's the best way to spend Lent.

1. Self-check

The verses for today are usually read on Ash Wednesday, which is the first day of Lent. "Ash" means repentance. The people of Israel in the era of the Old Testament gathered together in the temple during famine and hunger or disaster and wars, and prayed to God. In the Book of Joel, it describes the disaster caused by the horde of locusts, which ate crops in the field, nuts on the tress and all the plants. The Prophet Joel called the people to come to the temple and pray and ask for God to stop it. During such time, people put on sackcloth and ashes and ripped the sackcloth, However, when it became routine and people got used to it, even though they looked like they were repenting, the inner repentance had been ignored. Therefore, God spoke through the mouth of Prophet Joel and said, "rend your hearts and not your garments" and demanded true repentance and internal changes from the people.

The true repentance that leads to internal changes starts from self-check. We visit a doctor and dentist for semi-annual or annual check-ups even if we are not sick. We send our cars to regular maintenance. Likewise, Lent is the period when we ask God to check our inner selves. And the most important thing for a self-check is to be honest with God and present yourself willingly. This is called "HOW" in the counseling field, in which "H" stands for "Honest", "O" stands for "Open" and "W" stands for "Willing". If you have to be honest with your counselor during a counseling session, then you have to be more willing to open your heart in front of God.

However, we, humans, tend to deny inconvenient things and protect ourselves. This causes us not to look at ourselves correctly, and thus we cannot correct our problems. For example, we blame others even if we have a problem. This is called “passing the buck”. We often ignore our own problems and say, “I am in this situation because of my parents and boss” or “politics is wrong, society is wrong”. We sometimes cannot have a good relationship with others because we project our own feeling onto others. When you look at a mirror with an angry face, the person in the mirror looks back at you with an angry face. When you smile at a mirror, the person in the mirror smiles back to you. Likewise, when you are angry with others, you feel like others are angry at you. Most of the time, we reflect our own feelings onto others, and we should realize that.

You often hide your problems through ”underestimation”, which you feel it’s not a big deal, “generalization” which you feel everyone else is doing, and “rationalization” which you approve necessary evil. Even if you admit your own problems, you often pick up a part of it and say, “I wish I didn’t have this problem, and then everything would be perfect”. This is called “trivialization” and it frequently happens to us. For example, you hear a person who gets angry easily say, “only if I can hold my anger a little bit longer...” but the bigger problems exists elsewhere, such as unhealed wounds from the past, inferior complex, and various oppressed feelings, which lie subconsciously underneath the anger. These prevent us from true self-check.

2. Heart of Contrite

These are called “defense mechanism.” And you can learn more about

them in psychological study. It would be beneficial to have knowledge of psychology to understand yourself. However, it is not enough. No matter how much you try to understand yourself, you cannot see truth of yourself or you cannot transform yourself. God knows about us better than anybody else. God is the only one who can transform us. The most important is that we shall be before God and be willing to learn. In Joel 2:13, it says, "Rend your heart" and other verse of scripture says, "break your heart". In Psalm 34:18, "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit," and in Isaiah 57: 15 "For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite."

"Heart of Contrite" reminds me of a parable in Jeremiah 18:1-6, which is a story of a potter and clay. A prophet Jeremiah visited a potter's house, and the potter was making a container on a potter's wheel. However, he made a mistake so that he made a new one from the same clay. Then, Jeremiah received God's words. "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the LORD. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel." (Jeremiah 18:6) God is the potter and we are the clay in his hand. What God is looking for us is that we need to be soft clay so that it is easy to be re-created in his hand.

Jeremiah saw the potter who failed to make a container and re-created new one from the failed one; however, the best potter who is God never fails to make us. We, human beings, have been losing ourselves by our sins and by staying away from God. Therefore, we

become like dried and harden clay which is almost stone. However, as long as we are staying in God's hands, we will be re-created. A certain potter wrote an article, and it says, "no matter how hard the clay is, you can use it again if you pour water before fire it." This reminds me of Jeremiah's story. No one can say "My heart is too hardened and I cannot repent anymore." The repentance is what God is looking for in us. Therefore, God never removes the opportunity to repent from us. God can pour the water of life into the harden clay, which is our heart, and it becomes soft clay again. That is the "breaking heart" and it is the "heart of contrite" which will be accepted by God.

3. God's Love

Then, what is the water that the clay needs. It is the love of God. Joel 2:13 says, "he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster." "Grace", "mercy", and "steadfast love" in this verse point the love of God. Each word describes each side of God's love. "Grace" can be defined as the love toward undeserved people. "Mercy" means the love toward the people who are in pains due to their own sins. "Steadfast love" comes from the unchanged nature of God. God never say to us, "You deserve the result of your misdeeds." And, he never abandons us. He always has mercy on who are in pains and sufferings, and promises the recovery and blessings. The rest of the book of Joel, after today's reading, talks only about the promises of salvation and blessings. The field eaten by locusts will produce again. Moreover, the Spirit of God will come to the people. The book of Joel prophesies the ultimate salvation. While God was talking about the repentance, His heart started burning. He

couldn't keep the word of recovery in His heart.

This burning love of God is pouring into us now. God says, "Return to the LORD your God." He says "I am YOUR God." We don't go to an unknown person. We return to the One who created me, loved me, saved me from sins, and gave me life. We go back to "MY God" whom we came from.

"Repentance" and "remorse" are different. "Remorse" means that you regret the past things saying, "I shouldn't have done such things." or "I should have done those things." But, "repentance" means that you turn to the place you should be from the place you shouldn't be there. The story of prodigal son explains beautifully what the true repentance is.

When the son had fallen low and wanted to eat the pig's food, he came to himself. He found he was in the place he shouldn't be there. Though he knew he was no longer worthy to be called "son" of his father, he decided to return to his father. He called his father "MY father" in the original Greek text. He still called "MY father" to his father. He also found the unchanged relationship of love between him and his father. Then he arose and came to his father. (Luke 15:17-20)

A Christian is the person who repented his/her sins, believed in Jesus Christ, and confessed the faith by baptism. However, repentance, faith, and confession should not be only in the past tense. Repentance, faith, and confession should be in our whole life. Even you don't sin by actions after you became a Christian; you may have thoughts not adequate to the God's will. Your love to God may become cold. We will see our own uncleanness as we come near to the Holy God. Therefore, we always need repentance as well as God's

grace, mercy, and steadfast love. God will give His grace, mercy, and steadfast love to the person who repents. I really want to pray together with you that our self-check during Lent season leads us to true repentance.

(Prayer)

Dear Father, you always invite us, saying “Return to the Lord, your God.” You are MY God who created me. I am YOUR people redeemed by you. During this Lent season, bring us to the relationship of love. Lord Jesus gave himself to establish the relationship between you and me. Help us to praise the redemptive works of Jesus Christ. Though Lord Jesus, we pray.