

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Lent 2-B; 24 February 2018
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster

Turning from Illusion

I. Introduction

Last week we talked about the vision we carry in our hearts that, when tested by the evil we encounter in the world, teaches us about who God is and how God has empowered us to change the world. Tonight we take that idea a step further when we talk about penitence: turning loose of the things that separate us from God and walking into genuine relationship. Penitence is all about setting aside the illusions that keep us far from God and embracing the reality of God's presence in our lives. Sometimes penitence may feel like bearing a cross but, like many things in life, the results outweigh the effort.

I want to begin by reflecting on another historical figure, besides Jesus, who carried within himself a clear vision of the Kingdom of God and called others to join him in experiencing it. This person's name was Frederick Douglass.

II. Frederick Douglass

This past Tuesday, the 20th of February, the Episcopal church celebrated the life of Frederick Douglass. Frederick was born a slave not far from here in Talbot County, Maryland in 1818. But Frederick did not accept the idea that some people could be owned by other people. Frederick had a vision of a world in which all people were held in equal regard, regardless of skin tone, gender, or any other characteristic secondary to simple humanity. Frederick had a vision of what the Kingdom of God looks like, a vision unencumbered by those illusions of racism and greed which were ubiquitous in his time, and still powerfully present in our own.

Frederick himself eventually escaped to the free states, living out most of his life in New York and Washington, D.C. Frederick's principle calling, which he continuously pursued until the day of his death, was to travel around speaking in support of the abolition of slavery. Frederick was a powerful speaker, conveying the injustice of human slavery and the dignity of all people. He called a nation and its politicians to penitence, that is, to make room in their hearts to discover the illusions in which they were drowning and to live and act with a more true

apprehension of the world. Frederick kindled the fires that resulted in Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the U.S. Constitution, outlawing slavery and promising equal citizenship, protection, and suffrage for all people regardless of race.

Frederick Douglass was not a professional politician. What he was was a man with an understanding of reality which was not widely shared, but which he believed passionately and for which he advocated tirelessly. Frederick spent his life fighting a pernicious illusion that had resulted in the death, torture, and enslavement of untold numbers of people.

III. Penitence

Today many of us labor under illusions to which we are blind just as Frederick's contemporaries were blind. It is an illusion that I am always good, reasonable, kind, or patient. It is an illusion that I am independently powerful and able to accomplish my will in the world. It is an illusion that I am in control and that I can fit in to the vagaries of the culture in which I live.

It is also an illusion that my habits and my compulsions are who I am. It is an illusion that I am defined by my habits as a consumer: what I choose to eat and drink and wear. I am more than all these things – and so are you.

Penitence is to turn from all these things, to reject all these unrealities, and to make space for something more true in our lives. Penitence often involves fasting, giving, solitude, and prayer because these are the ways that we *clean out* the illusions and we stop paying attention to them. These are the ways we clean house and create space for something new, something real, something life-giving, something true. In our Lenten practices of abstinence and self-denial, we slowly and laboriously make space. We purge the *illusions* that fill our hearts and offer *God* a home there instead. This is what we mean when, in the Eucharistic prayers, we offer ourselves as a reasonable, holy and living sacrifice to God.

It's like when a blackout comes and all the lights, but ALL the lights go out. I remember this was the case during the Northeast blackout of 2003. Was it dark here in Glassboro? I lived in the Bronx at that time. That night I saw stars that hadn't been seen from my street in decades.

When all the artificial lights went out, we could finally see what had been there behind them all along.

It's like when you live near a busy street, but then you go camping out in the country and you hear the tree frogs and the cicadas and the crickets: all the critters that sing all night long when their songs aren't covered up by traffic noise.

It's like tasting pure water after subsisting too long on sugary soda and other artificially sweetened drinks.

III. Penitence as a Lenten Practice

In each of these cases, it can take a while to cleanse the palate, to start to taste and listen and see again when the noise of "normal life" is removed. Our Lenten practices, whatever they are, are intended to create the space and the attentiveness that will allow us to see God doing a new thing in our lives.

Frederick knew that slavery was a social construct, a conceit, an illusion that had cast its spell on nearly everyone around him. Frederick invited his contemporaries to turn loose of that illusion and to live in the freedom that is the normal, natural, true condition of humankind. Jesus used strong words to invite Peter, and all who would be his disciples, to turn loose of our own conceits and illusions, and to live instead in the Kingdom of heaven. The Kingdom of Heaven is not a place, but a manner of living right here, and right now, that is free from illusion and full of the knowledge of God.

Lent is a time to engage that process of turning from illusion to reality. It is a time of penitence and making space. Lent is a time to discover anew the God that holds us tenderly in God's hands. Lent is a time to prepare ourselves so that we might better participate in the joy of Jesus' resurrection which we proclaim every Sunday and especially at Easter. I invite you, in the next few weeks, to engage the practices that will make, for you, a holy Lent and a new discovery of what God is doing in you.

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