

Let's talk about Penitence and Repentance. Webster's dictionary defines them the same way: an action or feeling of remorse or sincere regret.

I have to say—this is one of the only times I've disagreed with Webster.

It really shows why there is such misunderstanding of the word "repentance".

But first: Ash Wednesday begins with Penitence. After this sermon we will pray the *Litany of Penitence* --where we list and express regret for the things we haven't gotten right this year.

We will pray about not loving with our whole hearts, not forgiving others, not serving when service is called for, not being true to what Christ envisions for us. It goes on, this list.

And we know it. There are so many ways we haven't lived up to even OUR expectations, much less to God's.

As we reflect over the past year, we think about the ways we failed to do the right thing. That's always the biggest list of regrets I have each year—what I didn't do.

Although --- sometimes I rush into things that I then have to apologize for. But this is not what keeps me up at night.

I find myself beating myself up about things that I should have done, people I should have visited, letters I should have sent—and it doesn't matter at all that I often just ran out of time—then I get to beat myself up because I don't manage my time better.

I am truly sorry—penitential-- for these things.

And I humbly repent. Which is a different thing altogether.

According to the Bible-- what repenting *doesn't* mean is feeling penitent. It doesn't mean I beat myself up about things. That's being Penitential.

It doesn't mean I ask God's forgiveness—though I will do that too.

Repentance—or *metanoia*—means being called to a personal, absolute and unconditional surrender to God. It might include sorrow or regret, but it's much more than that.

Repentance means that we now realize that what we did doesn't embody the love and fullness of life that God wants for us, and Jesus died for us to understand.

When we repent we understand our actions need a 180 degree change of direction- toward God. We don't repent because God needs us to do it. We repent because we feel we have done something that makes us feel terrible; we let God know how awful it has made us feel (penitence) --and we see that the way forward is to turn our face towards the love of God, and we vow – by repenting—to emulate that love, and radiate out toward everyone we meet.

We don't just repent on Ash Wednesday, during Lent, or even every Sunday—we do it daily—sometimes--- on a challenging day—hourly.

Our faith is not worked out in a single moment of decision or a during a moment of accomplishment where everything becomes clear. Faith is a daily practice of growing, with God at our side, each day, each interaction, each hour.

We don't have to worry that God will become irritated that we're not learning fast enough, or that we have setbacks. God knows that we will always be on the path to redemption, until we draw our dying breath.

And so we have ashes. Ashes to remind us that life is a journey that begins with our birth. All of us—no matter our circumstances begin as a tiny being who grows into a larger and larger being, both physically and spiritually.

But along the way—when we make our mistakes, we can do one of two things: we can hold them inside—trying to smother them, or hide them. We can keep a secret place inside us where we stuff such things—and we won't even let ourselves think about them.

But that's not healthy. Secrets can fester. They can poison our relationships and eat away at us from the inside out.

So we're back to penitence. We can say out loud the things that we can't hide any longer. We can be sorry. Then—and this is the important part: after penitence there can be repentance.

We can decide that we are going to follow a different path. We are going to let go of all the things we can't change, and promise to follow Jesus' way of love.

We will promise to love the Being that created all that is, and to turn 180 degrees (repent) and love everyone we meet.

How do we do that? Well-- not by manufacturing warm feelings, but by treating everyone with respect, and by acknowledging that everyone has dignity, has worth.

This Lent, recognize that penitence and repentance are not the same thing at all.

The first- penitence- confesses that we have let ourselves and others down, and the second – repentance—is where we pledge to turn around, and begin to see ourselves and others just exactly how Jesus sees us: as immensely loved children of God, who then take that love to give out to others. Amen.