



ONE STEP AT A TIME

February 10, 2016, Ash Wednesday

Michael L. Lindvall, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

Theme: We're always repenting, turning to become more who we are called to be – one step at a time.

Bless these words of Scripture to our hearing, O God. May they challenge us to be always turning toward you and toward becoming the men and women you call us to be. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.

During my freshman year in college, I joined a campus Bible study group. It didn't take long to figure out that this little group tilted toward the evangelical/fundamentalist end of the theological spectrum. I hung in there, though; it was a nice group of people. There was a lot of "repentance" talk when we met. Often this talk was couched in the question "*When were you saved?*" This question was meant to prompt the story about when you became a Christian, *exactly* when. This made me nervous because I didn't have a good story – no bolts of lightning, no tearful conversion. I had no story about former dissipation, or erstwhile atheism, or a great existential bout with despair. All I had was a boring tale about a faithful family and regular church-going. So when they started with the "*When were you saved?*," I just kept my mouth shut.

I especially recall one of the "when were you saved?" stories I heard in the months I attended the group. It was earnestly told by a sophomore in the group, a mousy young thing who told us she'd been saved five times. Five times and she was only 19! I had no idea what was at play in her psyche, but this seemed goofy to me, so I went back to the Presbyterians. They never asked when you were saved.

But you know what – she just may have had a point. Some people have indeed known a lone dramatic turning point in their lives, but most of us don't. Most of us



experience *many* points of turning in life. What I mean is that we're always "being saved;" we're constantly altering course, forever repenting.

The key New Testament term for Ash Wednesday is "repentance." We tend to hear this word wrong in English. We imagine it calls us to grovel out a list of our sordid peccadillos. But when Jesus uses the word "repent" – as he often does – what he's really calling us to is what you might call "course correction." The Greek word that gets translated "repent" quite literally means something more like "change your mind," or "change your heart," or "change direction." So in a crazy way, that young girl in my college group may have gotten it right in her serial experiences of being saved. She was right in that most of us don't alter course just once in life. We always correcting our course, that is to say, we "repent" time and again in life.

The Sermon on the Mount, from which I just read a passage, is Jesus' clarion call to be forever turning toward truer rightness – moving closer to rightness with God, rightness with others, rightness with ourselves. Scripture calls this "rightness" "righteousness," another fine word that we often misunderstand.

This repeated "course correcting," this forever turning toward a greater "rightness" is what Ash Wednesday – indeed all of Lent – is designed to help us do. When we gather here to confess of wrongs as we did when we spoke the 51st Psalm together, when we permit ashes to be daubed on our foreheads or hands, we're simply admitting to our humanity, we're owning our imperfection, we're recognizing the fact that we're always in need of this turning, this returning, this repenting, to use the old word.

I recently read a remarkable book, *Not in God's Name—Confronting Religious Violence*, by Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain. In the passage with which I'm going to end this reflection, Sacks is talking about cultures, but the point he makes is equally true of each of us individually.

Rabbi Sacks contrasts what he names "*two modes of being: respectively a blame culture and a penitential culture. The first focuses on external cause, the second*



on internal response. Blame looks to the past, penitence to the future. Blame is passive, penitence is active. A penitential culture is constructed on the logic of responsibility.” He concludes by saying, “When that is a culture’s response to tragedy, a profound dignity is born.”

You could paraphrase that startling observation in personal terms this way, words that sum up Ash Wednesday: *“When an individual’s response is penitence rather than blame, a profound dignity is born.”*

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen