

### Free To Be Real

Years ago, while I was still a teacher in Tonga, I recall a conversation I had with a fellow teacher. She was a Tongan, educated and very bright, having a master's degree in English. I think it was at the time I was considering an offer to go teach at the Methodist theological college in Fiji. She remarked, "Oh, I loved the time I was in Fiji. There, I could really be myself." There is something freeing in just being yourself; being in a place or among people where you can tell the truth and it's okay.

Ideally, we would want to be free to tell the truth about ourselves; to get real with ourselves and with God. Like Carl Sandberg (Illinois' famous poet and writer) once said, "Can we be honest for five minutes, even though this is Chicago?" If the truth were told, we would see that most of us are deeply flawed in some way. Yet we've come to this place because it's here that we hope to meet with Jesus, the One who can heal those flaws. He's the One who reaches out to sinners, sits down and eats with them and stays with them. When He's around we can be free to be honest with God and with ourselves, and there is grace.

Fresh from his baptism, Jesus was sent by the Spirit, into the desert where he was tempted by Satan. It was a real testing of his mettle, his integrity. Under duress, he faced himself and found that the truth of God *did* permeate his life. With God's truth in him he was able to withstand all the temptations hurled at him by the evil one. Jesus' baptism was his anointing - the desert his testing. Our baptism into him, in a sense, anoints us to be members of Christ's body. Peter says of our baptism that it is, "...not as a removal of dirt from the body; but as an appeal to God for a good conscience..." It begins the process of bringing God's truth to permeate our lives as we cross our deserts. It is a process of transformation.

[Are we afraid of transformation? Are we afraid because despite our activities we still don't have room for him? Is there room for him in our relationships with one another? Fear can get a grip on us. But Jesus, who is perfect love, casts out all fear.]

When Jesus returned from his desert preparation His first words to those who came out to him were, "Repent and believe the good news!" The good news is that we can admit we are flawed, and it can and will be used in our favor, not against us. God is the master of transformation and can use our past, our flaws, and our mistakes, to make with us better and lead us to a better future. Getting real, our true selves, is found in the person God intends us to be.

This past Wednesday was Ash Wednesday, the day of penitence to mark the beginning of Lent. Lent is a forty-day season of penitence, fasting, and prayer in preparation for Easter. It is forty days, just like Jesus' forty days in the wilderness when he prepared for his ministry. A number of you came to our Ash Wednesday services and received the mark of the ashes. Ashes, a symbol of repentance (Jonah 3:6; Luke 10:13; Matt. 11:21), remind us of our own mortality and leaving behind old ways while taking up the new life in Christ. Ashes are a sign, but it's our hearts that our Lord is after.

We can make outward changes, and that's a good start. Inward change, though, is more difficult - in involves scraping away the husk, to get down to the real person. That is what God seeks among us. On Ash Wednesday we saw a video clip where people shared their "cardboard testimonies." With black marker they put down words too difficult to

utter, telling of how God had transformed or was transforming them. They are powerful and inspiring testimonies.

When we share in his baptism we enter into his new creation; the new creation that Jesus actually embodies. Becoming a new creation with Him involves inner transformation and for most of us it doesn't happen over night. We need continual strength and reinforcement from God, through regular prayer and meditation with God, and by letting the Holy Spirit be our power, the real presence of our leader, Christ.

For several generations one of the most beloved of all hymns, was the gospel hymn "Just As I Am." It has been called the world's greatest soul-winning hymn, partly due to the influence of Billy Graham and his crusades. As a young man, Billy Graham walked to the altar in his conversion to the singing of that hymn, and ever since, his crusades on every continent have used it as the invitation hymn.

But the real power of that hymn is found in the one who wrote the words many years ago. Her name was Charlotte Elliott. She was born in England in 1789. When she was thirty-two, she suffered a rare illness that left her a permanent invalid. She sank into great despair and into angry, hostile, rebellion against God. The next year, her concerned father brought a minister into their home to talk with his daughter. God was with that minister that day. He said just the right words in just the right tone of voice, and suddenly the presence of God was felt powerfully in that room.

When Charlotte Elliott felt the Holy Spirit touching her heart, she gave up her rebellion, placed her complete trust in Jesus Christ, and accepted him as her Savior. From that moment until her death at age eighty-two, she always celebrated her birthday on that date--the day of her spiritual birth.

"That's the day I really came alive," she said. "The day I accepted Christ as my Lord and Savior is my real birthday." Later, she wrote the famous hymn that is her own spiritual autobiography;

Just as I am, without one plea,  
but that thy blood was shed for me,  
and that thou bidst me come to thee,  
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.<sup>1</sup>

The forty days of Lent are intended to give us time to renew our relationship with our Lord, time to ask for transformation to begin or continue or reach deeper. Within our own hearts we can repent of our selfishness and our distance from our true Lord, and let his truth permeate our lives. In truth we could probably enter Lent each day of the year. That's how often I need to repent of my distance from our Lord. How about you?

I invite you, in the name of the Lord, to enter into the true meaning of Lent. It begins with self-examination and repentance. But thanks to God's grace we are freed to tell the truth about ourselves. I invite you also to join me in some simple disciplines as reminders of the purpose of this season. 1) give up something you like or that is unhealthy; 2) be part of a small group for prayer, Bible study, one of our Core Classes - be accountable to other believers for your spiritual life; 3) make an extra offering to the Lord of your time or resources; 4) attend all the Wednesday devotionals; 5) commit to being in church every Sunday 6) commit to welcoming someone you don't know, each Sunday in church; 7)

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<sup>1</sup>James W. Moore, STANDING ON THE PROMISES OR SITTING ON THE PREMISES, (Nashville: Dimensions for Living, 1995), 71-72.

commit to praying for a nonbeliever you know - find out their needs and pray for them. These are all prompters, to nudge us into the transformation that God can make in our lives. Above all make a change in your life pattern that will take you closer to God; seek his transforming truth!

Come this morning to his table, where he feeds your soul and by his grace we are freed to be real. The truth is, we need him to make it through this life as he has called us.

We can begin today, but let us not stop tomorrow. Come as you are, and leave as a new creation.