

In this Lenten Season, are we looking for a moment or a movement?

This Ash Wednesday, which marks the start of the season of Lent, I gave permission for us to rid ourselves of the pressure to do and be all things and instead embrace the micro-movements that pave the way for true and lasting reconciliation in Jesus’ name. This charge was born out of the truth that sin has caused a breach in our lives and whereas our actions in response or reaction to this breach are often outsized and performative, when we tend to look for a moment to overcome the sin so we can move on and forget about it, what we really need to do is embrace the micro-movements of wholeness and faith that help us establish a more sturdy life of discipleship.

Olivia Hamilton writes in her sermon called “Tiny Things”: “Author and podcaster Kendra Adachi has coined a term useful in this Lenten season: “big black trash bag energy.” Determined to reform our lives (albeit overzealously), so many of us barge into Lent with a sort of bullish energy. We are ready to make big shifts and lasting changes! Aiming to construct new habits (better diet, more exercise) or de-activate old ones (too much tv or screen time), our spiritual senses are on high-alert as we seek to strip our lives of that which might get in the way of holy living- in the way of the desired “right” relationship with God. Rather than appreciating the slow and steady work of lasting change, it seems easier at times to chuck all our worn-out ways of being and start again from the ground up.” *(Journal for Preachers)*

In this spirit, Lent has become a “blow it up and start over” moment. A stuff all the things we don’t like into a big black trash bag and help it find its way to the dumpster. Out of sight, out of mind.

However, this sort of radical cleansing that many of us seek is not only self-abasing, but I would argue counterproductive in the grand scheme of personal transformation. What if, instead, we embrace the micro-movements of faith?

What is the smallest step that I can take, today, to move closer to God’s love? What is the micro-movement of the Spirit that might be stirring in me that can nudge the needle away from self-centeredness and toward a more complete compassion?

If we live in this season focused on micro-movements of faith, what kind of spiritual transformation might take place? The truth of the gospel is that “our lives of discipleship and faith come to life when we stop seeing big change and seismic shifts in a moment as

our goal and begin to see that what is done in a small way with great love is perhaps the most noble action of all.” (Olivia Hamilton, *Journal for Preachers*)

Today, I want to define and discuss a micro-movement of faith of which we are invited to begin in this Lenten season: repentance. The God of our belief, revealed in the still small voice, the faith of a mustard seed, and the person of Jesus who invites the little ones to come unto him, is a God who seeks our repentance. And repentance, I think, is not just a moment, it is a micro-movement toward wholeness, toward “right” relationship with God, helping to bring resolve to the breach caused by the sin in our lives.

The Christian faith proclaims that repentance is essential, to the Christian life of course, but also crucial for humanity in general. Repentance is a necessary practice for all who strive to be honest to experience, responsible to others, and whole as human beings. If this is true, then why does it seem or feel like true repentance is hard to find?

Here, I turn back to my original question today: Are we looking for a moment or a movement?

Take the case of baseball superstar Pete Rose, who died at eighty-three this past fall. Rose was undoubtedly one of the greatest baseball players ever to grace the game. A key figure in Cincinnati’s legendary Big Red Machine teams, Rose’s strong hitting, gold glove fielding, and hard hustling style make him an icon to baseball followers everywhere and an idol especially for young fans. Voted to the all-star game a remarkable seventeen times in his career, he was, it seemed, sure to be a first-ballot inductee to baseball’s Hall of Fame.

But those who really knew Pete Rose were aware that there was a different person lurking behind the astounding athlete. “He was Charlie Hustle on the field,” wrote sports columnist Thomas Bowell, “Pete the hustler in cheesy business ventures off it.” Eventually it was revealed that the hustler in Rose had touched the third rail of professional sports by betting on baseball while still active in the game, including placing wagers on his own team. Consequently, he received the ultimate stiff-arm from the game he loved. He was banned from baseball permanently, the door to the Hall of Fame he coveted so dearly, closed and locked.

Rose aggrieved, fought mightily for restoration. For years, he showed up at Hall of Fame induction ceremonies, signing autographs (for a fee) and making his case for restoration to all who would listen. At first, he tried the timeworn approach of many snared in wrongdoing: lying and special pleading. Despite a freight car full of evidence against him, for fifteen years he denied any involvement in gambling. Finally, realizing that his denials were implausible, Rose switched tactics. In a tell-all autobiography in 2004, self-pityingly titled, *My Prison without Bars*, he at last

admitted what he had done, confident that the mere act of confession at this late date would wipe the slate clean and usher him, with trumpets resounding, into his rightful place in the Hall of Fame. In the book, he complained that he had been unjustly singled out, saying that if he “had been an alcoholic or a drug addict, baseball would have suspended me for six weeks and paid for my rehabilitation.” In the book’s epilogue, he pleaded for American-style redemption, namely moving on and letting bygones be bygones. “I’m sure that I’m supposed to act all sorry or sad or guilty now that I’ve accepted that I’ve done something wrong,” he wrote. “But you see, I’m just not built that way. So, let’s leave it like this... I’m sorry it happened, and I’m sorry for all the people, fans, and family that it hurt. Let’s move on.”

When baseball didn’t move on, Rose soured into bitterness, which he carried to the end. Convinced that an admission “I screwed up; let’s move on” was the magic formula to absolution, he never grasped the nature of honest repentance. In fact, he played every move on the chess board to avoid honest repenting. Now that Rose is dead, baseball may ultimately decide to forgive and to admit him to the Hall of Fame. But what Rose wanted was never forgiveness. He never really believed he needed that. What he desired instead was simply forgetfulness, a cost-free shrugging of the shoulders, which he thought was his due. He thought the mere passing of time should provide a passport to amnesty. “I’ve been suspended over thirty years,” Rose carped. “That’s a long time to be suspended for betting on your own team to win. And I was wrong. But that mistake was made. Time usually heals everything. It seems like it does in baseball, except when you talk about the Pete Rose case.”

-excerpt from Thomas G. Long “Preaching Toward True Repentance”

Pete Rose’s desperate scramble to avoid repentance is representative of countless less heralded and more everyday people in our society. Could be you? At times it is me. We have somehow backed ourselves into a cultural trap where honest repentance is as rare as white truffles. Repentance has always come with a cost, but we find ourselves in a place where either we do not see the need for repentance ever, or if we do, the cost seems too high for most of us to bear. So, what do we do? We know we can’t continue to live with it, so in an effort to minimize the pain or get on with things, we get out our big black trash bags and try to get rid of everything we can in a moment. If I just say the magic words...

How does the story change, how do our lives change, if, instead, we embrace the micro-movements of faith along our journey? Micro-movements toward wholeness, over time, accumulate and compound to produce a life of faith (discipleship). “A million tiny raindrops make the river high.” (“Tiny Things” by the band Cody)

In your life, in your faith, are you looking for... a moment... or are you looking for a movement?

To bring this back to our scripture reading for today, the prophet Isaiah is warning against efforts of false worship, those that really focus on the self rather than God but try mightily to cover it up with language or action that is really only a mask to the truth. What the early Israelites are doing isn't what God desires. God says at the end of verse 5, **“Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?”**, with the knowledge that indeed their efforts fall short. God desires true repentance, admittance to that which is wrong and damaging to the “right” relationship God desires to have with us. And God lists poignantly what is desired, (listen for the micro-movements of wholeness and faith) **“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice** (what does that better than grace), **to undo the thongs of the yoke** (forgiveness), **to let the oppressed go free** (dignity and empowerment), **and to break every yoke** (mercy)? **Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin** (to care for others with a servant heart, to be a generous giver)?”

What God says through Isaiah next is what awaits us when we truly repent and make room for the power of God to work in reconciliation of our breach. God is trying to tell us we will be better off when we truly repent. **“Then your light shall break forth like the dawn** (hope), **and your healing shall spring up quickly** (peace); **your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard** (redemption). **Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say. Here I am.** (companionship and partnership)

If you remove the yoke from among you (get rid of the mask), **the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,** (the lying and misplaced blame and accusations), **if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted** (do something to serve someone other than yourself)... **then your light shall rise in the darkness** (hope) **and your gloom be like the noonday** (you will be free).” And even better yet, **“The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail** (you will be made whole in the Lord and become fruitful).” And even more, **“Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt** (your old ways will become new); **you shall raise up the foundations of many generations** (built to last and endure); **and you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in** (your repentance will become a witness to the power of God for hope and reconciliation).”

Repentance isn't a singular moment (however big or small), it is a million micro-movements of true repentance that make a person whole and strong and able to live a faithful life of discipleship with God.