

The parable of the sweater



Pastor's Perspective

By the Rev. Karen Winkel

Midway through college, I spent a summer exploring Europe. Along with everything else, I packed a brown button up sweater to wear on chilly days. It wasn't until the end of the trip when one night I stepped out of a smoky pub onto a rainy street that I realized my sweater was in sore need of laundering; the dampness of the night had me realize the sweater had taken on the pungent odor of every place I'd gone that summer, including subways, train stations, and youth hostels. And the aforementioned pub.

After stopping at a market for detergent, I filled the sink in my room with warm water and proceeded to handwash my traveling companion. The water quickly went from sudsy clear to muddy brown. I squished and squeezed, and after a thorough going-over, I emptied the sink and rinsed the sweater in fresh water, but when I squeezed out the excess, the water was still mud-colored. I filled the basin a second time and repeated the process, and still the water did not run clear. It would take seven cycles of washing and rinsing to get my sweater clean again.

Although this was long ago, my sweater-washing scene comes to mind regularly and most especially in Lent. In this holy season, Christians engage in a 40-day season of honest self-reflection and spiritual realignment as we follow Jesus into Jerusalem and the unfathomable fate awaiting him there.



As we courageously consider our flaws and failings, it's tempting to wish for a "one and done," not unlike my plan with that brown sweater. When we pray as the psalmist did "Create in me a clean heart, O Lord," we may be hoping for instant results (and relief). Instead, what God may have in mind for us is a process requiring time, energy, patience, and God's faithful companionship. Not because God wants to rake us over the hot coals of our mistakes and missteps but because God is both gentle and kind.

It would take seven tries to get that sweater of mine entirely clean and fresh smelling again. When I was at last done, I was astounded to discover that it wasn't medium brown at

all. It was actually light brown!

Although church folks often speak of the "stain of sin," I'm more inclined to think that much of what afflicts us happens slowly and goes largely unnoticed. We fudge here, we fib there, we forget to be forgiving here, we fail to be generous there. Gradually, we become something other than what we truly are, something other than what God created us to be. Lent, if we enter it well, has the power to invite new noticings and fresh awarenesses.

Many of us grew up imagining God's disdain for our willfulness and waywardness. I wish we could all give that God up for Lent, picturing instead a Creator who loves us beyond our imagining and who suffers

the ways we cause ourselves and others to suffer because over time we've gradually taken on the hue (and unpleasant fragrance) of that long-ago summer sweater.

God does not wait for us to make ourselves presentable in order to love us, of course.

God never leaves our sides and is ever hopeful that we will awaken to our need for reviving and renewal. Lent is the perfect time to encounter a God who, like Jesus, joins us in our messiness and leads us, step by — sometimes slow — step, to a lighter, more sweetly-scented self.

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