

# The Hope of Lent: People Can Change - Including You

The hope of Lent is that we will come out of it a bit different than when we entered, having changed in some way for the better.

When I think of people changing, I think of the pastor of a church I once attended.

First Baptist Church, with its tall white columns and pipe organ and church suppers with real plates, sat just off the town square and was an institution of influence in that southern county-seat town.

I joined Second Baptist Church, with its low-slung, one-story red brick building and wood-paneled sanctuary; it sat on the edge of town and was not a place of power.

I was serving as an intern campus minister at the nearby university. People assumed I would join First Baptist.

I don't clearly remember why I joined the other church. Maybe I wanted to enter fully into the cross-cultural experience of living in a small southern town; I was from the urban north. Perhaps it was an amateurish attempt at ethnography.

In any case, I joined Second Baptist and parked among Chevrolet pickups instead of Buick sedans.

I began taking several of my male African-American students with me to church

on Sunday; they could not afford to go home on the weekend.

The young men were treated politely. They were most likely the first people of color to worship in that church.

One day, the pastor took me aside and shared that it was OK for these young men to worship at Second; they were students and would be gone at the end of the year, as would I.

He went on to say, however, there would be a problem if one of them ever tried to join. So, I needed to share that with them or stop bringing them.

I told the pastor that I would do neither of those things. In response, he shared that if one of these young men were to present himself for membership, well that would “not be good for me or for you.”

I had moved south with a robust sense of self-satisfied superiority when it came to issues of race. I believed the South was way behind the North in this arena.

My first pastorate in Philadelphia years later disabused me of any naiveté I might have had about the North as the land of enlightenment and justice when it came to racism; however, back then in that small town, I was still clothed in my arrogance-producing naiveté.

I went home from that conversation feeling pretty good about myself.

Several months later, I was daydreaming my way through one of the pastor’s sermons.

He always ended up preaching about the same three things: gambling, the liquor dealers and “liberal” politicians. I already knew he was against all three.

Besides, the closest place to gamble legally was 150 miles away, it was dry for 80 miles in every direction, and I was not registered to vote in that state.

I came awake when in the middle of a sermon one Sunday this pastor said the words “racial prejudice.” He said it was wrong.

He went on to say, and I will never forget the words, “Don’t look at me like that. I come from the same place you all come from, but something happened to me.”

He went on to say the love of God in Jesus changed him; he wasn’t like that anymore. I was stunned at the risk he was taking in that moment.

As I reflected upon his words later in the day, I engaged in what ethnographers call “reflexivity.”

That is where ethnographers, while studying another group of people, also study themselves. We grow in self-understanding as we grow in our understanding of others.

I realized I carried a pack of stereotypes and prejudices in my own soul. I also wondered, “How much was I willing to risk to do the right thing?”

Not long after that, two of these students joined the church. I am sure there were some in the church who did not like it.

However, that day as the two young men stood at the front of the sanctuary, they were swamped by people welcoming them. Change was gaining the upper hand.

Lent is about change, about coming out of it a bit different than we went into it.

People can change. I saw it in a pastor, while sitting six rows back, center pew, during a sermon to which I was not really listening.

I saw it among pick-up driving folks at a red brick church at the edge of a southern county-seat town. I experienced it as I saw some things about myself through the lens of another's courage.

We really can change. That is the hope of Lent.

*Editor's note: A [version](#) of this article first appeared on Kelsey's [blog](#), I'm Just Saying. It is used with permission.*