

Ash Wednesday Year A

Lections: Isa.58:1-12; Ps. 103:8-14; 2 Cor. 5:20b-6:10; Matt. 6:1-6, 16-21

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Good afternoon, Grace Church. Along with the solemnness of the day, it is also a joy to break open the Word with you as we begin our Lenten journey. I sometimes like to begin my sermons with a bit of my personal story.

As some of you know, I grew up in a Pentecostal church in a small town in southwest New Mexico. The vast majority of my neighbors were Roman Catholic. So every Ash Wednesday, some of my classmates would come to school with a dark smudge on their foreheads and there would be a long discussion about what they were giving up for Lent, usually some kind of sweet.

This was one of my first introductions to religious difference and I did not handle it well. One year in elementary school, I remember going to my grandma to ask why my Catholic friends had to give up chocolate in order to please God. I came back to school with a short sermon about why my classmates were very confused about what God wanted, not just on Ash Wednesday and not just during Lent, but how always, God wants true repentance and not false piety and empty gestures. Needless to say, I wasn't very popular for a few days. In the years afterwards, I would have my own struggles with repentance and understanding what God wanted from me, though that's a story for another time.

But, as with many things in life, there was truth on all sides of my first experiences of Ash Wednesday. Yes, God desires for us to truly repent, as my grandma taught me. God wants us to worthily lament our sins, in the words of our collect, to acknowledge, most importantly to ourselves, that our choices have left us at a distance from the full and abundant life God dreams for us.

And in our Gospel reading today, it might seem at first glance that Jesus is siding with my 7 or 8-year-old against my Catholic schoolmates. When you give to the poor, he says, or pray or fast, do so "in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

But we need to be careful here, because Jesus is not offering a quid pro quo. True repentance is not just feeling really sorry, guilty even, about our "sins," as I had been taught. God does not need or want an apology as a condition of forgiving us. Rather, God already forgives us. God, right now, is extending mercy towards us, and God's grace, right now, is actively working in us. So repentance, true repentance, is simply to accept God's limitless grace and mercy that closes the distance between us and Them, and then, to realize all the ways the goodness of that grace is showing up—in ourselves, in our relationships, and in our world.

Thus, in addition to acknowledging how distant our sin has made us from God, true repentance also requires action, and action beyond the sacred rituals we participate in this night. This is the message God has for the people of Israel through the prophet Isaiah:

"Is not this the fast that [God] chooses:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
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 work for God's dream of a just and reconciled world, where the oppressed are liberated, the hungry fed, the homeless sheltered, and the lonely welcomed—that too is what Lent is about. And here is the important part, church, working for justice is part of what Lent is about because injustice in the world is a product of our collective sin.

And this is where my Catholic friends had their part of the truth. Because our Lenten acts of penitence—both personal sacrifice and communal justice-making—carries its own reward. And the prize is not God's conditional favor. Rather, the prize of true repentance, of changing our interior stance *and* acting for justice, is an ever greater awareness of God's holy presence with us through all the changes and chances of our lives.

When we serve and give of ourselves to others, we become aware of how much God has already given us. When we double down on heart-felt, simple prayer, we become aware of just how much we need to ask from God. And when we fast, either from luxuries we don't truly need, or taking an overt action for justice, we start to realize how much our true joy and pleasure lies in the God who made us, who loves us, and who is always with us.

My friends, in a few minutes, we will kneel down, and receive ashes as a mark of our mortality and a reminder of how distant our sin keeps us from God. But may those ashes also be their own reward—a reminder of how close God dwells within us, on our minds, on our lips, and always, in our hearts. Amen.