

ASH WEDNESDAY
February 17, 2021

Text: Matthew 6:1-6 and 16-21

Theme: Practice Your Piety

Grace and peace to you from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ – Amen

Every Ash Wednesday the service includes these chilling words –
Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return

On this Ash Wednesday we hear those words while we keep a safe distance from one another. Today we will not come forward to kneel at the altar. We will not receive ashes on our foreheads – a visible sign to the rest of the world that we are starting our Lenten journey.

Let the words be sufficient. We do not need the black mark to remind us how fragile life is and how fragile we are. Today we let ourselves be vulnerable before God. We acknowledge with humility that no matter how hard we try to be obedient to God we fail. Our pride takes over and/or we become self-absorbed and/or we become numb to all that goes on in this world and act as if it is not our concern.

It is overwhelming to listen to all the different ways we disrespect God and each other. Our litany of sins reminds us that we are more like Adam and Eve than we had hoped. I cannot count the number of times in our Bible Studies that we have looked at the behavior of the Israelites and then said to ourselves that we are no better. It only takes a moment for us to turn away from our Creator so that we can do our own thing. So *yes* all of us will return to dust. It is the grim truth that we face today.

But embedded within these words of judgment are words of hope. In our confession there is another truth that is just as real as death but offers us a renewed sense of joy. It is the reality of God's love and forgiveness. It is the assurance that God is working in us all the time through the power of the Holy Spirit. We may not have ashes on our forehead this year but in that exact spot we were marked with the sign of the cross when God claimed us in holy baptism.

Lent is one of the oldest traditions in the Christian community that led new converts to those waters of baptism. Like all of our holy days it has changed over the years but its purpose has always been the same: It is a time of self-examination and repentance (demonstrated by self-denial) in preparation for Easter. For the next forty days we are to strip away everything that pulls us away from our love for Christ. We are to return to the basics of our faith and what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

So many of us grew up with the question – *What are you giving up for Lent?* It always sounded to me like a second chance for those of us who had already abandoned the resolutions we made on January 1. Often we give up our favorite foods like chocolate or ice cream. Our Confirmation classes are always overjoyed to hear that the forty days do not include the Sundays in Lent. They see this as a loophole and an opportunity to indulge from the thing they are withholding the other six days of the week.

Over time we decided to remove the dismal nature of Lent so the original question evolved into – *What do we want to add during Lent?* – and it was easy to say that we would add 10 minutes to our prayer life or read an extra chapter a day in our Bibles. Finding someone to help every day is a great thing to do during Lent.

The great danger of Lent is that we have made it into a to-do list that sounds like a list of rules. And rules tend to become laws and laws tend to define our sense of self-righteousness. If we see our Lenten disciplines in this way we will fail. We will crave that bowl of ice cream so much that we will give in and eat it anyway. We will miss a day of prayer and then abandon it for the rest of Lent. When we fail then our failure will lead to a sense of guilt and our sense of guilt will make us feel defeated.

So as not to fall into the trappings of Lent there is a more excellent way. All of us will be better prepared for Easter if we use these 40 days to define the one thing we want to work on that will increase our faith and then pursue it with grace (and not guilt). We are to name it but not make it into a law. We are to be persistent even when we mess up. Lent should challenge us but not crush us. It is a specific time on our church calendar that is meant to help us develop a life-style that will take us beyond these forty days.

When we look at these traditional disciplines of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting we can modify them to fit our context. It may not make sense to fast from food especially if it makes us miserable or it is not healthy for us to do so. But what would a fast from our electronic devices look like? If our iPhones and iPads and computers keep us from listening to God and being present with others then is that not an appropriate fast?

As for almsgiving or tending to the needs of others it is one of the foundations of Scripture. In Hebrew the word for *alms* literally means *justice* and *justice* in Scripture is a call to care for the poor. It is not an optional act but is a moral imperative. It is a non-negotiable part of loving and serving our neighbor. One of the most creative ideas I have come across to help the homeless is to make kits for those who live on the streets. Pack a water bottle, a \$5 bill, a pair of socks and gloves, an energy bar, and a print-out with the phone numbers and addresses of local shelters or other places people can find help. Everything fits in a big Ziploc bag. Lent offers us a time to be generous, creative, and to have fun in a meaningful way – no matter the amount we give.

From St. Teresa of Avila: Christ has no body now but ours. No hands, no feet on earth but ours. Ours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world. Ours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Ours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Ours are the hands, ours are the feet, ours are the eyes, we are his body.

And then the third discipline is prayer. As easy as it is to fold our hands in prayer and have a conversation with God there remain so many unanswered questions about its purpose and effectiveness. Think of prayer as stepping into the presence of God. We are to slow our pace and quiet our minds and be still. Once we acknowledge his presence we are to be thankful for blessings received no matter how big or small. We are to focus on who God is and who we are in relationship to him. We call out to him not for what we need but in adoration. We remember his steadfast love for us and his mercies and grace. And then we confess to the Almighty God our sins and ask for forgiveness. Once we are fully engulfed in his presence we then ask for what we need.

Listen once more to the order by which we can learn to pray: Be still, be thankful, remember who God is and who we are, worship the God we know, confess where we have erred and be clothed in his grace, and then ask for what we need and want. At the end of our prayers we are left with a fuller understanding of how God is at work through us and for us.

We have a lot to think about and consider during this season of Lent. We each need to define the one thing we want to work on that will increase our faith and then we are to pursue it with grace. It could be something that we want to withhold so we can listen for God. It could be something we offer to others that shows our love for neighbor. It could be approaching our prayers in a way that we experience the fullness of God. Choose one and may God bless us on our journey.

Amen