

## **Be Reconciled to God**

A Sermon Preached by Anne Keener  
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee  
February 18, 2026  
*Ash Wednesday*  
2 Corinthians 5:15-6:2



As I thought about this service, the phrase “in humility and in faith” kept coming to mind. You might recall that these are words I often speak from the font during the Call to Confession. Christians around the globe gather today on Ash Wednesday in humility and in faith. We come acknowledging that we sin and fall short, but that isn’t the whole story.

We come to receive ashes and remember that from dust we are and to dust we shall return. Many people see Ash Wednesday as a day of gloom and do not want to acknowledge their mortality. While this is a solemn and reflective day, it is not a day of gloom.

If we were responsible for reconciling with God, it would be a day of gloom. If we believed God remains at a distance with a ledger accounting for each action or inaction, it would be a day of gloom. But we gather today to hear scripture that declares God sent Christ who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Christ we might become the righteousness of God. Christ came to us so we might be reconciled to God no matter what we have done or left undone, because it isn’t ours to earn.

I have wrestled a bit with the word “reconciliation” this week. Like many words, there are several definitions. One being “the action of making one view or belief compatible with another.” An example would be our personal reconciling of how the same person can say hateful things to people in one situation and then be so loving in another situation.

Then those of you in a certain profession probably first think of reconciliation as “the action of making financial accounts consistent.” For those non-financial people like me, financial reconciliation compares two sets of financial records (like your cash book and bank statement) to ensure they match, resolving any differences to confirm accuracy.

A third definition of reconciliation is “the restoration of friendly relations.” An example would be family members reconciling after years of not speaking to or being in relationship with one another. This most closely connects with the use of reconciliation here, yet I still wrestled with what Paul means when he urges the people of Corinth to be reconciled to God.

This caused me to look at the Greek which is translated here as reconciliation. I will spare you my potential butchering of the Greek language and simply share that it comes from 2 words where the first word intensifies the root of the second word, which is change. So, it might also be translated “radical change,” which resonates with me. When Paul urges them to be reconciled to God, we might think of him encouraging them to let go of any issues among them that might prevent this radical change which will transform their relationship with God.

While discussing this passage with Eddie, he used a Venn diagram to help think about reconciliation. We live in a broken world where society tells us there are two separate circles with God in one and humanity in the other. But faith draws us a different picture. Faith tells us the circles overlap. Through reconciliation, our relationship with God is restored. There is a radical change which leads to transformation. This radical change is the accepting of God’s grace which is offered to all. Through Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, we can be reconciled to God and live in that overlapping space of divinity and humanity.

We talk about the kingdom of heaven being now and not yet, and the overlap in the Venn diagram is where we experience the kingdom of heaven here on earth. This is the sacred space where heaven and earth, divinity and humanity meet, allowing us to experience the kingdom of heaven through the Holy Spirit.

To use Paul’s words to the Corinthians, through reconciliation, there is new life; the old life is gone, and a new life has begun. Or maybe it is better understood as an old relationship is gone, and a new relationship has begun.

In this overlapping space, we are able to recognize God at work around us. In this sacred space, we witness people who have cut off past relationships come together to discuss their differences, see the other as a human being, listen to one another, and then with God’s help, find a way to restore relations, be reconciled, and live in relationship.

We experience the kingdom of heaven on earth when after being hurt by the theology of another faith someone allows themselves to be vulnerable enough they sit down with someone of that faith to hear their story, learn what their faith means to them, share their own hurt, and find healing. In moments like these, we experience the kingdom of heaven as trust is rebuilt one conversation at a time.

We experience the kingdom of heaven each time we see someone living out their faith by loving their neighbors in ordinary and extraordinary ways like offering a hot meal to someone who is hungry or playing a key role in the civil right movement like the Rev. Jesse Jackson. In each situation, a person chooses to see another as God's beloved child created in God's image and act accordingly.

Sixty years ago, our denomination felt God calling us to respond to God's reconciling power by writing a new confession in response to the civil rights and racial injustice in our country. As a result, the kingdom of heaven was experienced through the writing of a confession which calls the church in every age to express "its witness in words and deeds as the need of the time required" (9.02). The Confession of 1967 focuses on the theme of reconciliation, both because reconciliation is always "the heart of the gospel at any age. [And because] Our generation stands in peculiar need of reconciliation in Christ" (9.06).

This confession, as each in our *Book of Confessions*, is a statement of what we believe as followers of Christ written in response to a specific time and place in history. Reconciliation isn't just words offered. Reconciliation is an action that restores community and opens us to a new way of life.

Being reconciled to God doesn't allow us to sit back and simply be grateful. Reconciliation should propel us forward in gratitude. It should ignite a passionate response to participate in God's reconciling work around us. It should inspire us to live lives of action grounded in love of God, love of neighbor, and love of self.

We don't worship on Ash Wednesday to simply acknowledge a day in the Christian year. We gather to begin our Lenten journey and be inspired to have a holy Lent. We gather to reflect, to be reminded of our mortality and our relationship with God, to be nourished at the Lord's Table, to be transformed, and to be sent. We gather today, as we do each time we worship, to praise God, to confess our sin, to hear the Word read and proclaimed, to pray for ourselves and others, to be nourished, and to be sent out into the world to be the hands and feet of Christ.

Paul clearly declares we must no longer live for ourselves but for Christ since he died for all. In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself not counting trespasses against us to reconcile a ledger. God isn't waiting for us to initiate reconciliation. Through Christ, God initiates the reconciliation. God longs to be in relationship with us. When we recognize and receive God's abundant grace, we are reconciled to God and become ambassadors for Christ. When we are reconciled to God, we are in relationship with God, and that relationship propels us to live as ambassadors for Christ. Through reconciliation, we hunger to reflect God's love and thirst to participate in God's reconciling work in the world.

In a few minutes, we will receive ashes placed upon our forehead or our hand in the sign of a cross while hearing those familiar words, "dust you are and dust you shall return." By receiving these ashes, we humbly acknowledge the fragility of human life and our sinfulness, individually and communally. But Ash Wednesday isn't just an acknowledgement from which we came and what we will become.

Today marks the beginning of Lent, our 40-day journey *On the Way with Jesus* to the cross and beyond. Lent is a time of repentance and self-reflection as we prepare for Easter, but it isn't passive. As with faith, Lent is a time to receive and respond. Paul warns not to accept the grace of God in vain. Maybe another way of saying this is "Don't receive grace without letting it transform you."

So in humility and in faith, let us come to the baptismal font dipping our fingers in the water as a reminder that we are saved by grace through faith. Let us receive the imposition of ashes remembering dust we are and to dust we shall return. Let us partake in this holy meal of bread and wine with Christ's words echoing within, "Do this in remembrance of me." And may it all inspire our Lenten practice. Whether we give something up or take something on, may we observe a holy Lent. May we be reconciled to God, transformed by grace, and sent forth as ambassadors for Christ as we journey *On the Way with Jesus* to the cross and beyond.

May it be so. Amen.