

Ash Wednesday – February 14, 2018  
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 / Psalm 103 & 51/II Cor.5:20b-6:10 / Matt. 6:1-6, 16-21  
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Happy Valentine's Day – and a blessed Ash Wednesday to you! It seems a bit strange for these two highly symbolic observances to fall on the same day. And yet, oddly, it is very appropriate that these two days, both focused so keenly on the condition of our hearts should meet.

Ash Wednesday invites us to experience the ultimate in a “cardiac check-up”. The liturgy of this day and all the Scripture readings challenge us to allow the Spirit to shine the divine Physician's examining light on the true condition of our hearts.

Someone has said that Ash Wednesday is *the* most honest day that Christians observe. We are drawn this day to look with naked eye at the gritty reality of those two forces always at play in human life -“Sin” and death. We avoid looking at either of them directly.

First off – death. Sobering truth: We are all born with an “expiration date”. Thankfully, we don't know when exactly we will “expire”, die. It's not tattooed on our bodies anywhere. I wonder how we would live differently if the date of our death was tattooed on us so we could see it?

Human beings are such experts at self-deception, that it's good we have at least one day of the year designated to “coming clean” about our mortality. “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust” are the words of commendation we hear at funerals. “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return”, we will hear in a few minutes as the sign of the cross is traced in ash on our foreheads. *“Our days are like the grass; we flourish like a flower of the field; when the wind goes over it, it is gone, and its place shall know it no more”* we read in Psalm 103. It's so easy to go into “automatic pilot mode”, get completely wrapped up in all that comprises the days of our lives – the things to accomplish, places to see and visit, people to be with and love and take care of, experiences of adventure to seek out, and experiences at all costs to most certainly avoid. Our days of enjoying and enduring life in these living, breathing bodies are numbered. It's worth thinking about how we are spending those “dash years”, the years between our birth date and the day we will die.

The goal in being “real” about death is not to be morbid – but to become more awake and alive! To re-turn, to turn again toward those things which most contribute to our hearts' health. Essentially, those things that matter most are our relationships – with God, others, ourselves, and all of creation.

The words of the prophet Joel and the words of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew “bookend” this call to focus on our hearts’ condition. The prophet calls to the community of the faithful: *“Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord, your God, for God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.”*

And in Jesus’ words which are part of the Sermon on the Mount, he teaches about navigating faithfully our relationships with others and with God – *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. **For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**”* Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Whether we know it or not, behave like it or not, our treasure is the gift of being in relationship.

And it is in our relationships – with God, others, and ourselves that the reality of sin is most clearly evident. Capital “S” Sin – that which causes division, separates us from God and each other. Literally in Greek it means, “missing the mark”, like an archer shooting an arrow that misses the target he was aiming for. We’ll acknowledge our proneness to sin as we read some of these words in Psalm 51: offenses, transgressions, sin, iniquities. The hymn “Come, thou fount of every blessing” says - “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it; prone to leave the God I love. Here’s my heart, oh, take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above.”

If I had written that hymn, I would have written “Here’s my heart, oh, take and *HEAL* it, heal it and then seal it for thy courts above.” That’s why we turn the spotlight more directly on sin today and for this season of Lent which we now enter. We acknowledge and name sin to experience healing and wholeness – healing of our hearts for the sake of healing the world. Healing in our relationship with God. Healing in our relationships with others. Healing within ourselves. Healing requires self-examination, truth-telling, confessing, being reminded of God’s love, receiving forgiveness, and going to “walk in newness of life”. There is no healing without acknowledging the sickness and brokenness inside us first. This honest self-examination and truth-telling is the beginning of being “reconciled to God”, as the apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Corinthians.

There are two opposite tendencies that we are especially prone to fall into during Lent. It’s easy to fall into either one, or both. The first tendency is to focus so intently on our sin and estrangement that we come to view ourselves as wholly unworthy of God’s time,

attention, love and forgiveness. This tends to look like wallowing in our guilt for our failures, “things done and left undone”. It is in a way to spurn the heart of God, our Lover. The other tendency is to see Lent as a spring self-improvement project. At one time in my life, I was prone to falling into the first tendency. These days, I am more prone to wanting to run a grand self-improvement project! This too, is to say “no, thank you” to the wonderful gifts God my soul’s true lover wants to give me. So let me share with you part of a wonderful article I read called, “Letting This Lent be God’s”. The author Marina McCoy begins:

“What if this Lent we didn’t approach the practices of prayer, almsgiving, and fasting with any eye to what we can do to transform ourselves, but rather with an eye to what God wants to do in order to transform us?

Too often we approach Lent as though it were a series of New Year’s resolutions: to give up a particular bad habit, or share more with the poor, or be more faithful to prayer. But Lent is not about self-improvement. Lent is a time of conversion in which God is in charge of our conversion. Not us.

After all, Lent is a preparation for the season of Easter, and in Easter we see that Jesus comes to save us, despite ourselves. Peter swears up and down that he will never betray Jesus, but then he does. A thief on the cross ends up being the first to be in heaven with Jesus, a most unexpected consolation. Women go to the empty tomb to mourn and end up being missioned by Jesus, resurrected. Jesus reconciles with Peter despite the betrayals and then gives him a central place in leadership. Easter is full of the unpredictable. Easter is a lot of crazy, beautiful surprises with the Resurrection at its heart.

If this is true, then Lent is not a project of self-improvement. Rather, it’s a time of allowing God to transform us. Lent is a time of intentional cooperation with God’s graces, where God leads and we follow, like a good dance partner. We can choose to follow or not, but God is always in the lead.”

Can we let God turn our hearts toward home this Lent, toward healing, health, and hope? Can we allow God to bring more wholeness and holiness into our lives? Can we allow God to work conversion in our bodies, minds, hearts, and spirits? This is my prayer for each of us - that we will let this Lent be God’s for us, to work in us that conversion which we most need, to break our hearts open once again to receive the fullness of God’s redeeming and life-giving love. Lord, come, make our hearts your home.  
Amen.

