

Seeking Wholeness

Joel 2:1-2,12-17
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
Matthew 6:1-6,16-21
Psalm 103

Tonight, the central symbol of our gathering is Ash. In a moment we will be receiving ash on our forehead while be reminded that dust is our origin and end. That being the case, you may wonder why it is ash, rather than dirt, that is used to cross our foreheads. Ash is symbolic of the burning away of sin. Dust reminds us that life is short, while ash reminds us that the next 40 days are for intentionally working with God to eradicate our sin.

You all know me well enough now to know how much I dislike churchy words that sound right but have lost their meaning. So tonight, we will reevaluate the word “sin”. What is it that we are genuinely attempting to do during Lent? What does burning away sin even mean? For those who have been in the church for years, there is probably an established pattern of behavior. We have things we “give up” for Lent like chocolate, coffee, alcohol, or meat. But why? Maybe we spend more time feeling bad about ourselves or begging God’s mercy. Does that burn our sin away? Do the things we do and the things we avoid doing during this season serve the intent of tonight’s ashy cross on our skin?

Many explanations have been given for the goal of life. Narrowing it down will always be an oversimplification. However, tonight we will work with this one, based on Paul’s admonition. The purpose of life is unity with God. Paul says, “We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God”. When we are at one with God, everything else falls into place. Therefore, anything that stands in the way of our unity with God can be classified as sin.

It is and always has been common practice for Christians during Lent to practice three particular spiritual disciplines: fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. If separation from God is our problem, then these three things are avenues back into unity. Fasting addresses

ourselves. It is our way of removing whatever aspects of our lives tend to distract us from God; whatever diverts rather than pushing us closer to God. Prayer then takes that extra time and attention and redirects it towards God. And almsgiving is the natural response to a unified relationship with God. Providing for those in need is a key way that we, from a unified participation in the life of God, offer that same unity to others. When the hungry are fed, the naked clothed, they can finally feel God's loving nearness. When Paul says not to receive grace in vain, he's indicating that the restoration of our unity with God will always flow out from us towards others.

Interestingly, tonight we hear Isaiah and Jesus both talking about these ancient spiritual practices with some degree of ambivalence. For them, the practices themselves seem to carry as much risk as benefit. We are warned against doing them at all if they are done in a way that does not serve the desired goal... unity with God. And part of the way we will know they are not aiding our quest for restoration is if our relationship with ourselves or others is suffering by not bearing the fruit of wholeness. In other words, if our practices harm ourselves or others then, it may be best to avoid the practices altogether.

The challenge of Lent, therefore, is to evaluate ourselves honestly. Ascetic practices have always been used by religiously faithful. But, according to tonight's Scripture readings, they are not in themselves of any benefit. So, when we look at fasting, or giving something up for Lent, is the loss we feel drawing us closer to God or is it making us hate ourselves, our body's weakness, or even God's own self because we believe God has asked us to harm ourselves? Be honest, anyone who's ever fasted has felt the draw to all three of those forms of angst! It is possible that the fasting itself should still be done. But if we are going to fast from something to honor the ashes then we must purpose to allow the discomfort to draw us only closer into love.

The same is true of our prayers. You will never hear a minister say to avoid excess prayer! Prayer is nearly the definition of unity with God. But we have to listen to ourselves pray and

craft our prayers to fit our goal. If our penitence heightens our feeling of separation from God, or our focus on sin makes us shrink away from God and others, or if it becomes a rote system of recitation devoid of meaning, then none of that will serve our aim. Pray, certainly pray. But we must pray from the heart of tonight's Psalm, trusting God's compassion and love. Our prayers must remind us of the love of God who is our protector and caregiver, and in so doing strengthen our hearts in that fellowship with the one who loves us more than we can imagine.

The same is also true of our almsgiving. Isaiah's caution is poignant. He too indicates that God's goal is for our unity with God and others. Most significantly, his focus is not on the giving of charity to make ourselves feel better or even to lessen the suffering of others. His focus is on unity through equity. He insists that we do not look away from the suffering of others. Giving alms to provide housing isn't even enough, he says to bring the homeless poor into our own homes. He tells us to not hide ourselves from the suffering of others. So, the honest question we must ask is if our almsgiving allows us to distance ourselves from the hurting or if it draws us into relationships of equality and unity with them?

Jesus tells us that where our treasure is, there will our hearts be also. Treasure here is symbolic of accumulated wealth. It is what we work for, focus on, and give ourselves to, day after day, year after year. Over the next 40 days Lent provides us a unique opportunity to accumulate spiritual wealth in the form of unity with God. Paul says that the apostles lived as if they had nothing, yet they possessed everything. When we realize that our unity with God is an endless source of power, wealth, and healing, we find that closeness with God truly is the greatest treasure; the only treasure that endures and sustains.

As we take these ashes onto our skin, may we embrace our Lenten pilgrimage as an opportunity to let God burn away anything that stands in the way of our unity and may our lives and lives of those around us flourish as a result.