

Ash Wednesday
Joel 2:12-17 and II Corinthians 5:20-21
“Ambassadors for Christ”

Welcome to Ash Wednesday, which was not a part of the tradition in which I grew up. I went to a Methodist Church in Rome, Italy until I was 8, and we certainly didn't get ashes there. I went to a Presbyterian Church in Pleasantville, NJ after that, and we didn't get ashes there as part of our tradition. When I served in Italy, we certainly did not have ashes, because it was too Roman Catholic, we were told. But then, for the first time in my life as a pastor, as we focused on the spiritual disciples, I served ashes on Ash Wednesday in 1999. Ever since, the importance of Ash Wednesday has stuck with me.

How often do you think of your mortality? I mean, seriously, unless you have suffered a tragedy, we are wired to not think of our own mortality, which I don't believe is healthy, because if we don't have a strong understanding of our own death and the role that Jesus plays in our life as he conquers death, then we miss the point. We have had a lot of mortality, a lot of beloved ones who have conquered death this past year.

Elinor Rudy, Bob Hartman, David Witmer, Emily Garber, Jo Book, Clark Taylor, Reub Stoltzfus, Shirley Danner, Linda Stoots, Peg Hosker, Paul Mills, Al Bernstorff, and Janice Bowers. As we hear when we come up and get the ashes, remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. And why do we need to remember that? Because God knows us very well. He is our Father, and he knows that if we don't come face to face with our own mortality then we could easily forget him and forget what Jesus has done for us on the cross, in his death and resurrection. We easily fall into the trap as time moves on, that we are the ones that are calling the shots and our life is all that matters, as tenuous and fragile that life might be. So we would do well to remember that we are dust, and to dust we shall return.

Today, the call for Ash Wednesday is to return to God and to be reconciled to God. Return to God, be reconciled to God. Both of our Scriptures call us back to God, and Ash Wednesday, this whole season of Lent really, is an attempt to do that. We are being called to return to God and to be reconciled to God. Let's read.

READ

A few weeks ago I mentioned something in my sermon that elicited a bit of a response from you all. I asked the question of how many of us long to be in a relationship with God that we once had. Meaning, once upon a time we had a relationship with God that you may say was

more intense, felt more real. I remember when I came to know Jesus for the first time as someone, as a person, and not just a name in which to believe, and I was absolutely on fire. The intensity and the emotion of it was unmatched since. And so we tend to see that as normative and as an experience and a time in our life for which we might long to achieve again.

But today, I don't feel that this is a time that we need to go back and discover. Maybe back then I was looking for a brick wall in which to run through to show my devotion and love. Today, I'm looking for that door in the wall that he wants us to open and walk through as our maturity in Christ reveals itself. Joel tells us to return to the Lord, not to go back in time and try to do what you did before.

You know why we shouldn't do that? Because for Joel and the people of Israel what they did before led to their disobedience and their sin and their walking away from the Lord. We move away from God as we go through life and as we sin. So Joel calls us back, he tells us to return to the Lord, and how we do that probably means that we need to do something different than what we have been doing all along, because up to now the end result may be that it leads us to sin. We want to return to the Lord in a way that we will stay with the Lord. That begins with recognizing that we need the Lord, that God is the one who has our very lives in our hands. We need to begin by contemplating our mortality which strips us bare, naked, fully aware that our lives are not in our hands.

When you read vs. 13 we read "return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." That is where Joel takes us, he commands us to return to the Lord. The Apostle Paul in II Corinthians tells us to be reconciled to God. When you walk out of here today I want you to think one thought: I must return to the Lord and be reconciled to the Lord. Maybe that's two thoughts, but let's make it one. Because you cannot return to the Lord if you are not reconciled to him. The only way that we can remember what it means to be reconciled to God is to remember that God is the one who has done the reconciling.

God did everything in his power to take the initiative to be reconciled with us. Do you have someone in your life that you purposefully do not have anything to do with them. In my line of work I hear of so many families where siblings, or at least blood relatives will have nothing to do with each other. Maybe there is one who is the outcast, or all of them have

blocked each other. There is a tearing of the family fabric that took place over something that happened normally a long time ago. What would it take to be reconciled to that person?

We read in II Corinthians what it took for Jesus to be reconciled with us. What it took Jesus to bridge the gap between us and God, so that we would have the chance to be reconciled with God. He even became sin, who knew no sin, in order to take all of sin upon himself. A transfer of sin took place from us to Christ. That is what he was willing to go through. This is the reconciliation that took place, long before we were even born.

But what God offers in love may be refused and what Jesus has borne for other may be ignored. It is necessary that people know what Jesus has done. We are called to be the spokespeople for that, but first we must be fully conscious of our need to be reconciled with God. Ash Wednesday helps us with that. Lent helps us with that, otherwise we would just carry on as if God has everything figured out and we don't really have to do anything, I mean anything in life, including be reconciled with God. Then Jesus' sacrifice is meaningless and without weight.

There are three Scriptures that speak to this transfer of sin from us to Christ, and therefore purifying us and making us fit to be his disciples, not because of what we have done, but because of what he has done for us. The first is actually an OT Scripture, Paul was probably referring to Isaiah 53:10 where we read that the suffering servant's life was made a sacrifice for our sin. Paul again takes up this thought not only in II Corinthians but also in Galatians 3:13 where we read that Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, by becoming the curse for us. Jesus took on the curse of sin and death. And then lastly in Romans 8:3 we read that God has done what no one else, not even the law, could do, by sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh.

Reconciliation is that work which is done in relationship. Maybe your relationship with Jesus has not been one of where he is someone you love, but rather just a name you admire. When we have peace with God, then we will surely have peace with each other. The converse is also true. If we do not have peace with each other, then more than likely the fact is that we don't have peace with God. Paul doesn't say let us be reconciled to one another, as important that may be, he says be reconciled with God. Everything else flows from there.

Ultimately, those around us who do not know Jesus will judge him through us, our actions, our words, our ability to reconcile and be reconciled and to return to God. Ash

Wednesday and all that we have said so far today is about God making the world right by his power. God created a new relationship between us and him and between us and us. A new commandment I leave with us, remember that, that you love one another. But it must begin with a love for the living Jesus to whom we must return and to whom we must be reconciled. Amen.