

## *Ash Wednesday Service*

February 17, 2021

### Greeting and Invitation to Lenten Discipline

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the season in the church year known as Lent. Lent is a time to prepare for the celebration of Easter and to renew our life in the mystery of the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We begin this holy season by acknowledging our need for repentance, and for the mercy and forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We begin our journey to Easter with the sign of ashes, a Biblical symbol of mourning and penitence. This ancient sign speaks of the fragility of human life, and marks the penitence of the community of faith. I invite you, therefore, in the name of Christ, to observe a holy Lent by self-examination and penitence, by prayer and fasting, by works of love, and by reading and meditating on the Word of God, beginning with this service this evening.

### Call to Worship

**Joel 2:1-2, 12-14:** *“Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near-- <sup>2</sup> a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes; their like has never been from of old, nor will be again after them in ages to come. <sup>12</sup> Yet even now, says the LORD, return to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; <sup>13</sup> rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. <sup>14</sup> Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD, your God?”*

## **Prayer of Confession**

Creator God, You fashioned us out of dust, breathing Your Spirit into us, so we might sing Your praise. But we have denounced Your gift of life in order to be our own gods, clinging to death-dealing idols of our own making. We have denied our creaturely status, seeking to lord it over those we label “less-than.” We believe survival-of-the-fittest lies, discounting the weak, and profiting by others’ pain. Not trusting in Your providence, we stop our ears to cries of those in need because we’re afraid we won’t have enough. We have been unfaithful stewards, O Lord. We live in a state of sin among a people of sin. Save for Your grace, we perish. Remember our making, Creator God; remember we are dust. Have mercy on us according to Your loving kindness. Breathe new life into us once more, so we might be the people You created us to be. Restore unto us the joy of Your salvation that we might do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with the Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

## **Silent Confession of Sin**

### **Assurance of Pardon**

“I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you will be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My spirit within you, and make you follow My statutes and be careful to observe My ordinances.” Friends, believe the Good News of the Gospel in Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. Amen.

## **Music**

### **Prayer for Illumination**

Spirit of all Wisdom, we desire to be reconciled to Your will in our world. Remove any obstacles before us that would keep us from understanding Your Word. On this Lenten journey, guide our footsteps that we might follow the path of Christ to the cross. Amen.

## **The Reading of Scripture**

**Psalm 51:** *“Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your steadfast love; according to Your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You may be justified in Your words and blameless in Your judgment. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. Behold, You delight in truth in the inward being, and You teach me wisdom in the secret heart. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that You have broken rejoice. Hide Your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from Your presence, and take not Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners will return to You. Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of Your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare Your praise. For You will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; You will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise. Do good to Zion in Your good pleasure; build up the walls of Jerusalem; then will You delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on Your altar.”*

**Luke 5:27-31:** *“After this He went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And He said to him, “Follow Me.” And leaving everything, he rose and followed Him. And Levi made Him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them. And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at His disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” And Jesus answered them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”*

## Sermon: *“Repent”*

Although I doubt any of us enjoy saying the words, I wonder if there is any more often used phrase than, “I’m sorry.” In fact, some people (myself included) probably overuse the words, even when it’s not necessary. For example, when I hear someone has encountered a bad situation, I’m the first to say “I’m sorry.” Not that I feel responsible, mind you. Rather more completely said, I’m sorry they encountered whatever it was that made them upset.

But in that particular usage of “I’m sorry” I see for myself how casual the words are. How easy it is to feel them roll off my tongue. And while the aforementioned case is hardly the only time I use them, I confess myself to be human, admitting that I have used them on occasion just to be done with a trying situation. Because, you see, sometimes, we say I’m sorry just to spare the other person’s feelings. Not truly believing that we’re at fault, somewhere along the line we learned that if we just “say sorry,” we can move forward, away from the negative, into a positive place again.

And such behavior is, I guess, okay under the right circumstances. It’s a kind of social balm that allows us all to get along with one another. But when it comes to repentance, saying “I’m sorry” just doesn’t cut it.

Lent is, by all accounts, a season for repentance. A time where we examine our lives with the precision of a surveyor. This six-week period gives us a chance to clean house. We’re called upon to figure out what is right, true and in alignment with God’s plans and purposes and what is not. But, believe me when I tell you, when finding some deed or trait that we know isn’t of God, simply saying, I’m sorry isn’t sufficient, it is. After all, when we’ve lied, when we’ve harbored hate in our hearts, when we’ve gossiped maliciously, is it sufficient to just say essentially, “Oops, my bad!” and move forward unencumbered by any regret whatsoever.

One of my closest friend's Dads said something once that stuck with me through the years. Upon hearing his son Matt confess some misdeed and concluding the recounting of it with, "I'm sorry," my friend's dad said this – "Don't just say you're sorry. BE you're sorry." Although simple his point was right on the money. What he was saying is don't just take the easier, softer way of uttering a stock phrase and then forgetting all about the matter. No, take accountability, alter your behavior and set right what you've made wrong.

Don't just say you're sorry, be you're sorry is as perfect a phrase as I can think of when it comes to repentance. You see, while repentance encompasses the words I'm sorry, they don't account for the entirety of the work to be done.

I once heard it said that repentance requires five individual steps in order to be what is intended by God. And intended it is. As we heard from Jesus Christ in our New Testament reading, repentance is required by all true Christians. This isn't some matter we can brush aside as true spiritual growth comes from embracing all five moves of repentance.

Our reading of Psalm 51 highlights for us the nature of these individual steps. First of all, you've got to acknowledge the sin in the first place. Verse 3 reads "*For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.*" In this verse, David, the author, acknowledges his sins.

Now, believe it or not, this is often the most difficult step. Somewhere deep down inside of us, we know when we've done wrong. But in our sinfulness, we have this uncanny ability to rationalize and justify our sin away. In a manner of thinking, we permit ourselves grace for things which, had others done it, we wouldn't have been so easily understanding and forgiving.

I've mentioned this before but long ago, I had taken up the practice of downloading songs off the internet. This, of course, would've been fine had I paid for them. But, using some piracy software, I was getting them all for free. Now look, I knew in my heart it was wrong but when those thoughts gurgled up from within, I pushed them down saying, "I'm not hurting anyone" or "that artist is really rich, they won't mind" or some other such nonsense. DO you see, I was allowing myself license to steal?

And we all do this.

But when we acknowledge our sin, we say essentially, okay, the gig is up, I know this is wrong.

Ah, yet you see, knowledge of a problem isn't the end of the process it's only the beginning. I might well know that when the rains come, a basement will flood but unless I take action, that basement is going to flood.

So, following our acknowledgement of sin, we must confess it to God. "*Against you and you alone have I sinned,*" David says in Psalm 51. Here he takes to God what he knows in his heart is wrong.

Now, a lot of us bypass these steps. We might know something we're doing is wrong, sinful, but we fail to truly repent of it because we don't bother confessing it to God. Maybe we think God already knows so why bother. Other times, we're so ashamed, so fearful of consequences that we fail to take our transgressions to God. Again, this isn't true repentance and has the tendency to keep us locked up in feeling bad about ourselves. Walking around experiencing a low-level disgust with ourselves is a sure-fire way to make our own lives miserable as well as the lives of everyone else around us. It's no way to live, believe me.

So, we confess our sins to God, asking for his forgiveness. We see this too in the Psalm as David says, "*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!*"

We confess our sins, asking for forgiveness, reminded always that we worship a loving God who has already forgiven us of our sin. Jesus died on the cross so that we could be spared the punishment for our iniquity. We reach up to God knowing from the Scriptures that no matter what we take to him, we will not be greeted with scorn but instead lavished with amazing grace. We can be fearless knowing that God has forgiven every type of transgression imaginable.

But while we're getting closer to true repentance, we're not quite there yet. Following our confession, we must turn from our sin. That's an important word in the Old testament. "Shuv" is the Hebrew word. While it means repent, it has the literal meaning of "Turn." As in we "turn" 180 degrees from whatever it was we were doing into a whole new manner of operating. David puts it this way, *"Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice."*

In turning from our sin, although we are red as scarlet in our transgressions, it is God who makes us white again. That is to say that He moves us from the stained and tattered clothes of our sin and adorns us yet again in the fresh clean garment of Jesus Christ. In real-time this is a pretty simple thing to understand, if we were stealing, we stop. If we were lusting, we discontinue it. If we were covetous, we seek contentment in what we have. For we are changed, made possible only by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

For not only did Jesus save us from eternal death, He also unshackled us from sin. That is to say we no longer need do it if our heart is so inclined.

Just one more step to go – we must make right that which we've done wrong. Must make amends to those people we've harmed through our sinfulness.

Again, we hear this in the psalm – *"Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit."*

This, I confess, can be a difficult and scary task. Who wants to potentially reopen wounds long since inflicted? But, if we're going to truly repent, this is part of the deal. Why? Well, we do so for a couple of reasons. First, because it is the right thing to do. But, moreover, we do so to be faithful to God. To allow our actions to show the full measure of Christ's maturity. And, believe it or not, it can help others come to Christ.

We go before someone we've harmed, confessing our misdeed and stand willing to make up for it, we allow other people to see the genuineness of our faith in the Lord. Many a hardened heart has been melted by just such actions.

Friends, the season of Lent is a season of repentance. May we all undertake these 5 actions as we seek healing for ourselves and joy for our souls.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

## **Music**

## **Charge and Benediction**