

"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 clothing." These are your words. Lord, sanctify us in your truth, your word is truth. Amen.

Some basketball players knew that their coach was a Methodist pastor. He never said much about it. They liked him and wanted to tease him a little and find out what he believed. So they were half-heartedly talking in the classroom about what they planned to give up for Lent. Some said chocolate, others said Coke, and one said Playboy centerfolds. Then one of the boys asked coach Morris what he planned to give up for Lent. The coach played dumb: "You mean you guys are supposed to give up something for Lent?" One of the team answered, "Yeah, you're supposed to give up something that gives you pleasure". Coach thought a second, and then said, "Well, I guess then for Lent I'll just have to give up going to church."

Well, coach had beat the team at their own game. His answer punctured their notions that Lent is just a temporary moratorium on indulging the flesh. Lent is more than that...it is the season when we center our attention on the one story that tells us the deepest truth about God's world: the story of Jesus Christ crucified. In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself---inviting us to the great feast that celebrates our oneness in Christ. Though Coach Morris pretended not to know anything about Lent, he knew the most important thing--that our truest pleasure is to participate in that feast of reconciliation. That's what we remember this season.

As we go through Lent, we tend to "mess us" a great deal. Good intentions disintegrate, and our best efforts foul up. As Paul says in Romans, "We do not do what we want, but we do the very thing we hate." We intend to become more patient, more loving and caring---and find ourselves lashing out at others more than ever, especially our loved ones. It seems that as we try to be good, the burden of our memories and guilt gets heavier and heavier. We hurt ourselves and others more than ever. It becomes a downward spiral until we cry with the Psalmist: "Blot out my transgressions! Cleanse me from my sins!"

Because Jesus Christ offers forgiveness, we need to return to the Lord. Jesus gives us the courage to stand up and move forward. He gives us his body and blood that we might have new life. By ourselves, we are broken. With Christ, we are made whole again. The Lord forgets our iniquities, but will never forget us. We return to the Lord, and move forward.

That may sound like a contradiction in terms--'return and move forward'. For the prophet Joel it was not a contradiction at all. The Greek New Testament word for 'repentance' is 'metanoia' (change your mind). It is a good concept. But here in Joel the Hebrew term is 'shuv' (return). The Greek word for repentance means to come to ourselves, the Hebrew word means to come to God. And because God is merciful, then we can be forgiven and start again, going forward in newness of life.

I guess the best way to describe Ash Wednesday is in terms of a marriage. It is grace which permits a marriage to survive. If someone is unwilling to forgive and forget, a marriage cannot last. God has entered a covenant relationship with each of us that is very much like a marriage. It is a marriage that survives because God has an unlimited reservoir of grace. It never runs out. No matter what humans do, God remains faithful and true. He promises to always be there. God's will, to bring all people into communion with him, does not change.

Ash Wednesday is a little scene from this marriage. It is not a pretty scene. Through the centuries, as a smudge of ashes is signed on the foreheads of God's children, it says:

-I am not God, I am a human being

-I am going to die

-I desperately need God's mercy and grace in my life.

The confession we make today is of our frailty and weakness....it is not a pretty scene at all. And yet it is just such honesty with ourselves and with our beloved (spouse or God) that makes marriage (covenant) possible.

The marriage scene of Ash Wednesday shows us the one thing that keeps us from being burned up by God's righteous fury: Our God is gracious, and merciful, and slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. God is merciful (the Hebrew word means mothering....God surrounds us with love like a mother's). And the Hebrew word for 'slow to anger' means 'long of nose' (it takes a long time for God's face to get red). Only this grace and mercy and patience of God makes our relationship possible.

Ash Wednesday has two sides to it. There is the ugly side....our sinfulness which we will never be able to control completely. And then there is the other (beautiful) side....God's side of the covenant, where God listens to our confession, invites us to return, and to go forward in faith. Coach Morris was right when he told the basketball team that there is a beautiful side to Lent...because of what Christ has done, there is a feast prepared for those who remain in relationship with Christ. We don't deserve an invitation.....someone else would have kicked us out of the marriage long ago. But God is merciful and gracious, and doesn't give up.

Come today to the banquet for sinners. We come with shame, knowing we do not belong at the Lord's table. But we also come with joy, knowing that he bids us in love to come....and to be changed.

This is where the sacrifice of lent comes in. God is not impressed that we make a show of forgoing some pleasures for a few weeks. What pleases God is a broken and a contrite heart, a rebellious heart that is tamed by his love. It can be wonderful to fast....but we do it for God....that others may be blessed.

Last year I read a Pastor's monthly congregational letter that talked about adding something instead of giving something up for lent. He called on parishioners to add daily devotions, to add visits to someone who was ill or lonely, to take on a ministry like that of our Lord on behalf of others. Lent is more than giving up pleasures, it is living closer to

Christ.

May I suggest a Lenten sacrifice today? Millions of people are starving in our world...if we would tame our rebellious hearts enough to sacrifice that others would have food for their bodies, God will bless us with food for our souls. Give it a try. Make a commitment this Lent to live for God and for others. Even when we do this privately, it will be a powerful witness to others where God can be found. Our God is not honored by flashy bumper stickers and showy prayers, but in broken hearts and humble service.

Return to the Lord, and move forward in faith.

+The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.