

Ash Wednesday
Lenten Meditation
February 21, 2007

“Even Now”
Joel 2:1-2; 12-17
2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent. It is a season when we think on the reality of sins in our lives. John Henry Newman said, “We dwell in the full light of the Gospel, and the full grace of the Sacraments. We ought then to have the holiness of the Apostles. There is no reason except our own willful corruption, that we are not by this time walking in the steps of St. Paul or St. John, and following them as they followed Christ...Nothing is more difficult to be disciplined and regular in our [faith]. It is very easy to be [faithful] by fits and starts, and to keep up our feelings by artificial stimulants; but regularity seems to trammel us, and we become impatient.”

One of the frustrating realities is no one sins without making some excuse to himself for sinning. We all have our, “yes, but” or “except” rationales for why we sin. Lent is a season in which we take a step back from looking at things with eyes deeply conditioned to see the status quo. We take a step back to look to see how God sees our lives. We look to see how God sees our individual lives as well as our corporate lives.

Lent is a tough season. Christians who start by taking Lent seriously on Ash Wednesday are going to come to Easter Sunday feeling “bloodied by the contest” between sin and grace. This is true individually and corporately.

Corporately, we have to acknowledge that we are part of a culture that rejoices in mocking God. We have to acknowledge that we are part of a society that pursues idols of self, of image, of wealth, of sex. The fascination with the death and scandal of Anna Nicole Smith shows us a side of ourselves that shames us. Yet, we celebrate when taboos are broken down. We celebrate when wrong is declared right (consider the movement to re-define marriage), when good is declared bad (consider the efforts to make proclaiming the gospel a hate crime), and where righteousness is denounced as being oppressive.

Last night, news broadcasts around the country and around the world showed video of the bacchanalia and hedonism of Mardi Gras in New Orleans, as if this were the measure of restoration of a great society. I saw reports talking about how important Mardi Gras was to New Orleans; “We need it to save the city.” Really? What does Mardi Gras celebrate? Drunkenness, flesh, self-satisfaction, lust and greed. It mocks Christ’s walk by “getting the good times in before we have to suffer for God.” Think about it: people saved their money, made arrangements for a pilgrimage, and traveled to New Orleans (or alcohol-fueled festivals in any city around the country) for the purpose of reveling in the flesh. And it is considered a mark of “recovery,” celebrated as if it is a good thing.

We have to recognize that we are part of a society that rejoices in mocking God.

Individually, we have to acknowledge that we have sinned against God. In the Psalm we read, King David, “a man after God’s own heart,” says, “For I know my transgressions and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight., so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.” We are no different. I am no different. My sin is before me; and I know how I have sinned against God. Tonight, as we gather here and as I am speaking with you, your sin is before you; and you know how you have sinned against God. Whether it is sexual sin, whether it is lying, cheating, gossiping, tearing down, being selfish, or whatever it is: you and I both know that our sin is before us and we know that we have sinned against God.

We have to acknowledge that we have sinned against God.

Lent is a time when we take a step back from the status quo and the life that has made us comfortable.

The prophet Joel proclaimed the word of the Lord to a people that had become comfortable *in a culture of sin*. He proclaimed the word of the Lord to a people that had become comfortable *in their own sin*. He proclaimed the word of the Lord to people comfortable *with the status quo* because they believed that God was with them regardless of what they did.

The word of the LORD calling the people back follows a terrifying description of the consequences of their blindness to their spiritual condition: “Put on sackcloth, O priests, and mourn; wail, you who minister before the altar. Come, spend the night in sackcloth, you who minister before my God; for the grain offerings and drink offerings are withheld from the house of your God. Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly. Summon the elders and all who live in the land to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD. Alas for that day! For the day of the LORD is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty.”(1:13-15)

Unlike other prophets, Joel does not bother with a list of indictments against the people and their leaders. There’s no need. Their sin is right before their eyes. They have become so hardened that they do not even see it. They are not faithful, but they sure expect God to continue to be faithful to them.

What’s remarkable is that God calls to them. “Even now,” says the Lord. “Return to me.” God calls the people to return, calls them to repent of the path which leads to death and destruction.

For a people who live in a culture that rejoices in mocking God, for a people whose lives include sin that seems less grave because “at least we’re not as bad as that,” we need to hear God’s call to repentance with fresh ears. “Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.” (Joel 2:13, NIV)

God does not want a show of repentance; God wants actual repentance.

Paul’s message to the Corinthians is the same: “Be reconciled to God.” The Corinthians, having received the message of salvation with joy, have become bogged down in pettiness that leads to

unfaithfulness. All kinds of sin crept in: sins of pride, sins of sexual immorality, sins of greed, sins of apathy. To these, Paul issues the exhortation, “We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.”

Friends, Paul’s words were to the Corinthian CHURCH. He was not writing to non-believers. He was writing to believers. “We implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God.” Could he not be saying this to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)?

The parade of horrors our denomination has – and continues to – revel in rivals anything that Israel or the Corinthians could boast. As a denomination, we have abandoned conviction in favor of tolerance. We have sought to be like the university rather than an evangelical outpost of ambassadors for Jesus. We cringe and shy away from Jesus’ walk to Jerusalem; thinking that the walk is too exclusive, too intolerant, too hard, too this and too that. We avoid offending people with the truth and remain silent as we exist comfortably in the midst of a lie. We keep hoping that things will get better though all evidence suggests that it will keep getting worse. Our prayer is that someone else, somewhere else, will do something to make things better so that we won’t have to do it ourselves.

“Wait,” you may be thinking, “We’re a faithful congregation! We’ve celebrated fifty years of God’s blessings and service to Jesus!”

Look at Paul’s description of the life of faith:

“We put no stumbling block in anyone’s path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way:

- in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses;
- in beatings, imprisonments and riots;
- in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger;
- in purity, understanding, patience and kindness;
- in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love;
- in truthful speech and in the power of God;
- with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left;
- through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report;
- genuine, yet regarded as impostors;
- known, yet regarded as unknown;
- dying, and yet we live on;
- beaten, and yet not killed;
- sorrowful, yet always rejoicing;
- poor, yet making many rich;
- having nothing, and yet possessing everything.”

(2Cor. 6:3-10, NIV) Fifteen things Paul cites as actions pursuing righteousness to people who live comfortably in the sin of the status quo.

Paul's point is not to boast in his own effort; rather, he is showing what a life of righteousness will look like in a culture hostile to God. How many of Paul's fifteen characteristics would describe our witness? Have we trusted God or have we sought to be comfortable in our culture?

I find this list convicting. Personally, I can see right in front of me the ways in which I have denied Christ in the hopes of avoiding being tagged as one of *those* Christians. I have remained silent when others have spoken in favor of declaring sin to be good. I have remained inactive as others have intentionally sought to make the proclamation of the gospel a crime (yes, that is happening). I know, I grieve, and I repent.

I approach Lent hearing Paul say, "We implore you on Christ's behalf: be reconciled to God."

And note when he says: Now.

Note what the LORD said through Joel the prophet: Even now. Rend your heart – now.

God's call to righteousness is *now*. "Even now," says the Lord in Joel. That means there is a time – as there was a time – when there will be no more time. Paul writes that "*now*, is the time of God's favor, *now* is the day of salvation." Not tomorrow, not soon, not someday: *now*.

During Lent, we take a step back from the status quo and remember the walk Jesus took to Jerusalem, to the cross, and then – only through the cross – resurrection and victory over death. Friends, don't be mistaken, there is no other way. There is no other savior. There is no other walk. There is no other path. "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

Easter is the celebration of Jesus Christ's victory over death; our death – yours and mine – that we earned through our sin. It is a celebration of our being washed clean by the blood of Christ shed on the cross. It is a celebration of our hope of being reconciled with God, the hope that assures us of our salvation because we believe that God has raised Jesus from the dead. It is our hope because we cleave onto Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Note the difference: Mardi Gras celebrates us: our flesh, our sin, our rebellion against God. Easter celebrates Jesus Christ: his sacrifice, his taking on our sin, his action reconciling us with God.

God's call to be reconciled, God's call to righteousness involves several things:

- An awareness of our sinfulness;
- A repentance of that sinfulness;
- A turn towards righteousness
- Holding on to Christ as our righteousness, now and forever.

Lent is an invitation to walk with Jesus.

We spend this time walking with Jesus. We slow down because the road to the cross was long. We slow down because we are often too quick to gloss over our sinfulness in the rush to get to the celebration of Easter.

When we walk, we have time to reflect on our lives.

We spend this time considering how Jesus Christ fulfilled the Law. He did not do away with it, he was the ultimate fulfillment of it. The writer of Hebrews says it well, ““Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”(Heb. 4:14-16, NIV)

We spend time reflecting upon our sinfulness and the cost that Christ paid for that sinfulness.

When we do that, we need to hear the words of the prophet Joel, “Even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and he relents from sending calamity.” When we slow down, we need to hear the words of Paul, “We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As God’s fellow workers we urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain. For he says, “In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.” I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation.”

Friends, as we impose ashes and as we approach this table, please understand that we are not engaged in meaningless ritual. We are called to repent, to be reconciled to God. We are called to share in the walk Jesus walked. We are invited to come to the table of righteousness, without any claim or right to be there, greeting our host, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

“Even now, “ says the Lord, “Return to me.” Tonight, I invite you; I implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God.” In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.