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Ash Wednesday
Isaiah 58:1-122/10/16
Psalm 103
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

**As we enter this Lent, may we
Pause,
Reflect,
Pray.
Amen.**

It has been said that on Ash Wednesday, Christians attend their own funerals. It is no mistake that this liturgy in which we partake leads us to contemplate our own mortality. We will soon be marked with ashes and admonished with these words: *Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*

It is a somber but compelling ritual, calling us to pay attention.

As poet Rilke wrote in his *Book of Hours* –

God, give us each our own death,
the dying that proceeds
from each of our lives:

the way we loved,
the meanings we made,
our need.¹

¹ *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*, III,6, translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy.

This is the gift found upon entering Lent. A chance to be *given our death* and to be marked with dust; to pause, examine our lives and repent of that which has come between us and God; to wake up tomorrow with the opportunity to adjust our course as needed – and through prayer and action to reconcile our hearts and lives.

And so we begin today with our death. As morbid as it may sound, the point here is not to mourn, but to reflect. Because that's what we do when we gather for a memorial service, we reflect on the person we've lost. Ash Wednesday gives us the opportunity to do this, in some small way, for ourselves. It calls us to look in the mirror and see who we are at this point and time, to make meaning of our story so far, and to reflect on what parts of us are lost.

We are lost for many reasons, and in big and small ways. We have estranged relationships with those in our lives. We have let our personal prayer practices lapse. We are in debt. We are *too busy* to honor taking Sabbath time. We keep in our possession a lot that we do not use, but from which we refuse to be parted.²

The list goes on and on, but what they all have in common, is that at the root, they are all outward signs of the fact that we've let *something* come between us and God. Which is why today, and for the coming forty days, we are called to focus on a discipline of penitence.

One way we enter into penitence is to repent – to re-turn, to turn again – as individuals and as a community. That is why today we face the difficult task of naming what separates us from God – our corporate and individual sin.

² *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2*, pg. 17.

No one likes to admit mistakes or confess to sins. It is not easy. But it is important, because there is little possibility of finding what we've lost, and re-turning to God, until we find the source of estrangement in our lives. And most importantly, confessing our sin is essential to reconciliation.

I believe that reconciliation is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. And here I would define reconciliation as re-turning and being re-turned.

It is both the process of re-turning and the arrival back to where we began, with God at our center. It is what we do, and become, once we have paused and reflected, once we have examined our lives and repented, asking for forgiveness. It's what happens when we forgive others and ourselves. It happens through prayer – the ways that we dialogue with God, the ways our actions in this world are prayer in action. It's what we *then* offer to the broken world around us, because once we are reconciled to God, we become a part of God's ministry of reconciliation.

Our reading from 2 Corinthians today begins by entreating us to be reconciled to God, and continues, declaring to us that *in him we might become the righteousness of God*. And while our passage from Matthew's Gospel says nothing about reconciliation, I think it still says a lot about how to live it.

It would seem that the focus on Matthew's text is piety. Of note is that while our translation of this scripture gives us the word piety, another translation can be righteousness or justice. This gives an important shift to the framework of the three acts Jesus outlines here: almsgiving, prayer and fasting.

But the operative word to pay attention in this Gospel passage is *secret*. In these few short verses the writer uses this word six times as an injunction against doing these things in public for notice.

In the culture of the time, giving and receiving gifts provided the framework in which relationships were negotiated and social status was displayed. You always showed your religious practices in public. It told people who you were. And it easily led to outward actions becoming more about self-interest, and less about relationship with God.

When you remove these actions from the public sphere, and remove the self-interest; when you use the lens of righteousness and piety, what you are left with are God-centered actions that bring reconciliation into the world: almsgiving can be charity and justice-making. Prayer can be, well, prayer – the constant that binds everything together. And fasting for us could be making choices to live simply and reduce our carbon footprint.

Living your faith out loud, *'faithing'* if you will, may today be just as counter-cultural as it was to keep your piety secret was in Jesus' day. Walking out the doors of the church with a smudge on your forehead doesn't make you a hypocrite, it marks you as one on a journey.

Death, penitence, reconciliation.

These are the steps on our Lenten journey. They help us reconnect with who we are, with who we can be, with who God made us to be. We are human beings made in the image of God, but we are made of dust and to dust we shall return.³

³ *Lenten Meditations 2012* from Episcopal Relief & Development, Shannon Ferguson Kelly, contributor.

And today it begins with being *given our death*, that we might pause and reflect to live a life *re-turned*, praying to *reconcile* the world to God's steadfast love.

~ AMEN ~