

Ash Wednesday: Holy Trinity Church: March 1, 2017

Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21: *Speak Lord, For Your Servant Is Listening.*

Preached

By

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

There is a time honored story about a Catholic priest who was working in the inner city. He was walking down an alley one evening on his way home when a young man came down the alley behind him and poked a gun into his back.

“Give me your money,” the young man said. The priest opened his jacket and reached into an inner pocket to remove his wallet, exposing his clerical collar.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Father,” said the young man, “I didn’t see your collar. I don’t want YOUR money.” Trembling from the scare, the priest removed a cigar from his shirt pocket and offered it to the young man. “Here,” he said. “Have a cigar.” “Oh, no, I can’t do that, Father” the young man replied, “I gave cigars up for Lent.” The priest might have been surprised at the young man’s logic, or his misplaced values, giving up cigars but continuing to rob people,

but at least he may have been encouraged by the fact that the young man was acknowledging the season of Lent.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, Lent is a time of reflection on the meaning of our lives in the light of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. During this Lenten season I challenge you to listen. I ask you to consider a very simple prayer that will prime the pump of your Lenten reflections. "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening." Such Lenten reflections necessarily calls us to give up any practices that separate us from God and one another. Ash Wednesday gives us a unique opportunity for bringing our lives into alignment with God's purpose for us.

But before we get into that, let's talk a little bit about Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday occurs forty-six days before Easter. That might strike you as odd, because we often speak of the "40 days of Lent." Here's the reason for the discrepancy: Sundays in this period are not counted among the days of Lent because Sundays always celebrate the Resurrection of the Lord. Lent is a penitential season, but Sunday takes precedence. Ash Wednesday falls on different dates from year to year, according to the date of Easter; it can occur as early as February 4 or as late as March 10.

Ashes are symbolic of repentance. The symbolism comes from the Near Eastern tradition of throwing ash over one's head signifying repentance or as a sign of grief or sorrow. The ashes are imposed on the penitent's forehead with the following words, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." This wording comes from Genesis. The ashes that are used in the service are derived from burning the palms from the previous year's Palm Sunday celebrations.

Here's an important fact: Did you know that Christians have been celebrating this sacred rite for nearly one thousand years? The celebration of the Holy Eucharist, the Stations of the Cross and the imposition of ashes are the oldest rites in Christendom. The name for this day was given by Pope Urban in 1099. I find this very significant. For 1,000 years Christians have bowed in contrition and have ashen crosses painted on their forehead. And now it is our turn. And so we hear from the book of the prophet Joel and read these words, *"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. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing."*

My brothers and sisters in Christ, many of us feel great remorse for our sins.

We have no idea of the terrible burden of sin that so many people carry around in their hearts that just eats away at them in the form of guilt and toxic shame.

***The Boston Globe* once reported the tragic account of the drowning of an eight- year-old boy in a small pond. The boy was playing with three friends looking for golf balls. The friends reported that when Chris slipped into the icy pond they thought he was playing a trick on them. But that story was not true. Two years later the boy who pushed Chris into the pond finally confessed his transgression. However, by then it was too late for healing. Each of the boys suffered long term emotional and psychological damage from the secret they had been carrying around in their hearts.**

My sisters and brothers in Christ, many people carry around a heavy burden of guilt. Maybe it was the way you hurt someone in your family. Maybe it has something to do with your place of employment. Maybe it has something to do with a past relationship and someone you hurt deeply. There is great therapeutic value as you receive the ashes upon your forehead. This is an important opportunity to take whatever burden of guilt and shame you have been carrying around your neck like an albatross and handing it over to God.

When you receive your ashes and go back to your pew, I ask you to look up at that altar and leave all those sins and leave all that guilt and leave all that shame by placing all of that stuff on the altar. Give it all over to God and once you do that pray, “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.” If you don’t have a Lenten theme, I offer this: I challenge you to give yourself the gift of peace and silence and listen for the voice of God. Invite God into your heart by saying, “Speak Lord, your servant is listening.” Then, be quiet and listen to that tiny voice within you speaking the truth. When you are silent, when you focus, when you listen only then can you hear God’s loving voice speaking to you no matter what you have done. The prophet Isaiah said, “Though your sins be as scarlet they shall be made as white as snow.” (Isaiah 1:18) From my own experience, the closer I feel to Jesus Christ, the more acutely I am made aware of my own sinfulness. Bad people usually do not feel much remorse.

I read a story about a restorative justice program in San Francisco.

Restorative justice involves setting up meetings between criminals and the victims of crime, so that the criminals can learn first-hand how their crimes impact people’s lives. Often, the meetings between victims and criminals result in healing for both parties. Attorney James Schwarz, a facilitator in this program, claims that a majority of criminals have “zero empathy” for their victims. They rationalize their crimes by claiming that they are the victims of

an unjust society. But Schwarz has seen many a violent offender shaken to his very core when he hears from his victim's mouth the extent of the suffering he caused. For many of criminals, this was the first time they ever thought about the effects and consequences their actions had upon their victims. Their sense of empathy and remorse motivated many of these hardened criminals to change their behavior.

My sisters and brothers, if you have come into this Ash Wednesday service with a feeling of remorse, then that is a good thing. It says something about you and your character. It says something good about you and your search for God and your relationship with God. Remorse is the first step in authentic repentance. Now it's time for us to confess to God our sinfulness and to make a covenant with God that we are making a new beginning. During this Lenten Season, I would encourage you to pray your Baptismal Covenant in the Book of Common Prayer, as often as possible, focusing on this question and this promise, "Will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord? I will with God's help.

I knew an old Army officer who for more than thirty-five years had been a heavy drinker. His alcoholism did not help the fact that he had the temperament of a drill sergeant long after he had become a Colonel. One day

the Colonel was invited to speak to a group of doctors. He described to these physicians a personality change that he had experienced. Now, he was as temperate as he had once been intemperate, as considerate as he had once been severe, as concerned for others as he had once been selfish. In the audience was a psychiatrist of the school which says that personalities are set very early in life. He protested that at his age you can't have a personality change. The Colonel shot back, "Well, as far as this recovering member of Alcoholics Anonymous goes at least I am under new management."

My brothers and sisters in Christ, maybe, just maybe that's what you and I need on this Ash Wednesday. Maybe it's not giving up deep sea fishing and sky diving for Lent. Maybe, it's not what you need to give up, as much as it is, what you need to hear, to listen and to receive a new Manager for your life. There is no better time than Lent to do this. As you receive the ashes on your forehead may your heart be filled with the life-changing power of Christ's Holy Spirit by praying, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening." Amen