

**Ash Wednesday: Holy Trinity Church: February 14, 2018**

**Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21: I wish you a Joyful Lent**

**Preached**

**By**

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

**An armed robber accosted a French priest on a dark, back street in Paris and demanded all his money. As the priest opened his coat to reach for his wallet, the thief caught sight of his clerical collar, and immediately apologized.**

**“Never mind, Father, I didn’t realize you were a priest. I’ll be on my way.”**

**The priest was relieved, of course, and good-naturedly offered the man a cigar. “No, thank you, Father,” the robber said, “I gave up smoking for Lent.”**

**One of the hallowed traditions of Lent is to that we should give up something, something we enjoy, for the duration of this sacred season. Usually it means something like chocolate, or beer, or some vice. This, of course, has opened us to a multitude of lame jokes. One civic-minded individual said he gave up taxes for Lent. Another said he had given up his New Year’s resolutions for**

**Lent. Comedian Stephen Colbert who, I understand, is a Sunday School teacher at his local Catholic church joked that he was giving up being a Roman Catholic for Lent. People laugh at the idea of giving up things for Lent, but the idea, originally, was to share experientially in the sufferings of Christ. Christ gave his life for us. We ought to give up something to show our devotion to him. However, even under the best of circumstances, this practice has never worked very well.**

**In our Gospel reading from Matthew we hear our Lord say, *“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”***

**My sisters and brothers, Jesus is calling us to a joyful Lent. A Lent in which we can do something positive like putting aside those trivial pursuits and preoccupations with things that have become more important in our lives than God. During this Lenten Season, make your Lent joyful by creating space in your life so that you become available to God who is always there waiting for you. Jesus was not saying, “Do not fast.” In fact, he appears to be**

**explicitly endorsing the practice of fasting. He even gives directions for how to go about it. “When you fast,” he says, “put oil on your head and wash your face.” In other words, fasting is good but not if it is an idle show of your religiosity.**

**I’ve always appreciated the words of one of the church fathers, St. John Chrysostom, when it comes to fasting: “Do you fast?” he asked. “Give me proof of it by your works. If you see a poor man, take pity on him. If you see a friend being honored, do not envy him. Do not let only your mouth fast, but also the eye and the ear and the feet and the hands and all the members of our bodies. “Let the hands fast, by being free of avarice. Let the feet fast, by ceasing to run after sin. Let the eyes fast, by disciplining them not to glare at that which is sinful. Let the ear fast by not listening to evil talk and gossip. Let the mouth fast from foul words and unjust criticism. For what good is it if we abstain from birds and fishes, but bite and devour our brothers and sisters?” That’s hitting the nail squarely on the head. Even a good thing like fasting can be abused.**

**The central purpose of lent is to bring us back to God. That is the message of our lesson from the epistle. If fasting or making small personal sacrifices brings you closer to God, that’s all to the good. But it’s important not to lose**

sight of why we fast or why we make personal sacrifices. St. Paul writes to the church at Corinth, *“We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. 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 . . .”*

The point of Ash Wednesday, indeed the point of Lent, is that we shall be reconciled with God, that we who have wandered away from Him might come home. We may indicate our desire for reconciliation by fasting or by making a sacrifice during the Lenten season, but that is peripheral. We are here this day confessing that we need to come back to God. To say we need to be reconciled to God, of course, is to confess that all of us to some degree are estranged from God. There are some members of this congregation who live very close to God. I am in awe of your spiritual commitment. But let’s not kid ourselves. None of us is perfect. We’re all sinners. There are gaps in our lives, emotions that will not heal, resentments that still fester, prejudices and bias that come to the surface under stress.

Children sing the little nursery rhyme, “Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall; All the king’s horses, and all the king’s men, Couldn’t put Humpty together again.” And it is true of our lives. We are

**broken people and the only hope we have of being put back together again is for God to touch our lives. We can't put ourselves back together again, but God can but we must create that space in our lives that makes us available to God so that God can touch us and heal us and restore us. The problem is the unnecessary stuff that interferes with God in our lives. Lent is the time to jettison those obstacles so we can be reconciled with God. Of course, if we are reconciled with God we shall more easily be reconciled with one another. Reconciliation with our neighbor always goes hand in hand with reconciliation with our God.**

**Anthony Robinson in his book *What's Theology Got To Do With It?* tells a story about the Palestinian Christian priest Elias Chacour. It is said that Chacour tired of presiding at the sacrament of communion in his congregation. The reason was that he knew that many of his parishioners hated each other. Some had not talked with one another in years, even decades, and bore grudges dating back to the previous generation. One Sunday Father Chacour locked and barred the doors to the church. Then he told the congregation that he had no intention of presiding at the service and sacrament or of unlocking the doors until those at odds with one another confessed their sins, offered forgiveness, and made peace.**

**What followed, after a stunned silence, was nothing short of remarkable. A policeman got to his feet, confessed his misdeeds and asked forgiveness.**

**Others followed. When the Lord's Supper was finally celebrated, it was no longer a mockery. It was a sacrament in which members of the congregation recognized one another as the body of Christ. At the end of this service I will be applying ashes to your forehead. There was a time when I would have cautioned you against making a show of those ashes. I would have warned you, as Jesus did, not to make a show of your religion. What I prefer to say to you tonight, however, is do not wear those ashes in vain.**

**My sisters and brothers, our world hungers for an authentic sign of Christian devotion. Our world needs authentic disciples who know God. If you wear those ashes home tonight, do not snap at your family. If you stop at a fast-food facility on the way home, do not be impatient with the server. Show genuine Christian love and goodwill in action. Be reconciled to God. Be reconciled with your neighbor. When we have the ashes on our heads, it is not a sign that we think ourselves better than others, exactly the opposite. We are sinners dependent upon God's grace. Fast in the way that St. John Chrysostom recommended. Do something positive this Lent. Do something that will create joy in your life. Fast by your good works. Jettison the junk in your life that creates obstacles to God and instead create that space for God in your life so**

**that you may be reconciled to God so that you can be reconciled with one another and then you will have not only have a joyful Lent, you will not only have a happy Eater, you will have a happy life. AMEN.**

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