

February 26, 2020
Ash Wednesday
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Isaiah 58:1-12
Psalm 103:8-14
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

For Christians, the season of Lent is a traditional time of penitence. If we're going to talk about penitence, we have to talk about sin, and if we have to talk about sin, we might well begin with Adam and Eve. Some say that the sin of Adam and Eve was disobedience, and the result of that disobedience was separation from God. I will reserve comment about the issue of disobedience for now, but I do agree that sin separates us from God. I also think it separates us from other parts of God's creation, and it even separates us from our selves. Separation from others, separation from self, and separation from God are entangled and can't be disentangled. Separation of one sort brings separation of the other sorts. The bottom line to all this is that separation causes suffering.

Fortunately, connection with others, connection with self, and connection with God are also entangled. Connection of one sort brings connection of the other sorts. With God's always-present grace, we can build connection as the means to overcome separation. I think this is exactly what we mean by reconciliation. Through reconciliation, God bids us return from sin-rooted separation. The point of penitence, then, isn't more suffering. The point of penitence is forgiveness and relationship and healing; it's reconciliation.

It's not necessarily easy. Reconciliation must always begin with honesty. Deep down we know we can't kid ourselves forever, and yet humans possess a powerful inclination to deny both responsibility and death. Behind that powerful inclination, I suspect, is profound *fear*. The antidote to *fear* is *love*, most particularly the love of God. God made everything; God loves all that God made. With God, we can remove the Mardi Gras masks. It turns out that those masks are just another source of separation. When we remove the masks, God can draw closer.

To this end, during the season of Lent, and on Ash Wednesday in particular, we strive to set aside our denial—most particularly our denial about the ways our choices and behaviors produce ripples of effects both near and far. In opposition to our denial, the ashes stand as a powerful symbol of both repentance and mortality. They remind us to take responsibility for the ways in which we have missed the mark; they remind us that we have limited time to get our priorities in order. I don't see this as an exercise in institutional guilt and oppression. I see it rather as a powerful opportunity to acknowledge and lament our failures, so that we might put them behind us once and for all, and close the gaps of separation. That we do it in community is itself a demonstration of the healing power of reconciliation to return us to right relationship.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus speaks about almsgiving and prayer and fasting. And he says to keep them to ourselves. That may seem an odd thing to hear as we prepare to take on a visible sign of our repentance in the form of a cross of ashes on our foreheads. But I think that Jesus is saying to be careful about our motives. Don't act out of concern for outside appearance or social validation; act out of concern for God. I can't imagine that publicly displaying our ashes is spiritually risky in our post-Christian society—I don't expect that any of us stands to gain at all in social standing because we came here today. But there are potential gains much more important than social standing. We live in a world that desperately needs healing in so many ways from so many wrongs. We are Jesus-following agents of healing. However we find a way to enter into participation in God's great project of reconciliation, and however we might enlist others in that effort, let us go to it.

On this Ash Wednesday, we gather together to witness to one another's willingness to engage in this powerful process, and to support one another in what for our culture is truly radical behavior. As we sow the vulnerable seeds of reconciliation, looking toward the fruit of the resurrection, may it be for us as Isaiah described for the restoration of his own suffering people:

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.
The LORD will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.¹

Notes

¹ Isaiah 9b-12 NRSV.