

# Sermon: Ash Wednesday

The Rev. Mike Wernick

March 1, 2017

Year A

Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalm 103:8-14

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

Why Lent... why do we need Lent... can't I just ask God to forgive me and get it over with... I mean... Jesus already died for a sinful humanity... so I'm good... right... and why does Lent come around each and every year... can't we have Lent maybe just once every five years... and why does it have to last so long... wouldn't a week be enough... maybe a week - end... and why do I have to give anything up... why should I do without... I work hard... and I'm already doing without a lot of things I'd like to do... or have... that a lot of other people don't have to not do... or not have...

But Lent begins today... and it lasts Forty Days... and we know all of those Biblical forties... how it rained for forty days and nights... how Moses was on Mt. Sinai for forty days and nights... how the Israelites wandered for forty years... how Jesus fasted for forty days and nights... but the point is... forty is a long time... and it takes a long time for us to change... a r-e-a-l-l-y long time for us to change... to mend our ways... to hit the mark... to become aware of how intimately connected... we and all of creation... are... it takes a long time for us to become and be the people God calls us to be... I've said before... if it were so easy for each one of us to learn every lesson we needed to learn... for all of those impurities to be burned out of the gold we are... then none of us would have any good reason to be here... we'd be off somewhere else... doing something else...

So as Lent begins... today's Gospel exhorts us... *Whenever you pray... go into your room and shut the door...* Ash Wednesday is the doorway through which the church passes... our collective doorway which we enter and then shut... our own little monastic cell as it were... our corporate doorway of ashes and dust... as we begin our forty days

of change... of prayer... of repentance... and reconciliation... and we do it every year... because... for pity's sake... there's still more to do...

Because it's so easy to say to ourselves... *Oh... that time I thought of myself first... that didn't really matter...* or... *Oh... when I threw away the recyclables instead of separating them from the trash... that didn't really matter...* or... *Oh... when I left the water running the whole time I was in the shower... that didn't really matter...* or... *Oh... when I kept silent that time someone made a sexist or a racist or a homophobic comment... that didn't really matter...* or... *Oh... that time I avoided a difficult conversation because I was afraid... that didn't really matter...* or... *Oh... when I didn't hold my elected officials accountable for embodying the Gospel or standing up for justice for all... that didn't matter...* but it all matters...

You see... we minimize... or even dismiss... the power of our free will... we resign ourselves to the forces around us as if no one notices... as if there is no effect... no consequence... for what we choose to do... or choose not to do... so we do not... as a nation... really practice the righteousness described in Isaiah... we do not really follow God's ordinances... yet...

Our NSRV translation of today's Gospel says: *Beware of practicing your piety before others...* and the New Oxford American Dictionary defines piety as: *the quality of being religious or reverent... referring to acts of piety and charity...* and that's how we think of that... isn't it [?].... but the original Greek word... means *righteousness...* or *justice...* beware of showing others... how righteous you are... how just you are... because when you do it to be seen by others... to have others think more highly of you... because the small self... the ego... isn't grounded in God and needs to be fed... then you have received your reward... you have received what you need... but when the left hand doesn't let the right hand know what it's doing... when one member of the community doesn't boast to another member about how righteous or just they are... then God's

work is done... and God notices... and ancient ruins are rebuilt... the foundations of many generations are raised up... and we are called the repairer of the breach...

It's a hard thing... I think... I have struggled in my life... to find that middle ground... that mid-point... between believing that I am worthless... that I am worth less than my parent's love... my parent's time... that I don't deserve second chances... that I don't deserve God's forgiveness... and fooling myself into thinking that the universe was created for and revolves around me... alone... and crawling back from either of these extremes... to a healthy middle... takes a lot of mindfulness...

But Lent gives us the time we need to figure it out... who we are and who we're not... when we're selfish and when we're not... when we do things to be noticed and when we don't... when we can give and when we really do need to be nurtured and fed... when we're having a pity-party and when we're having a heart attack... God gives us Lent for us... not for God... and maybe forty days isn't enough... but no one says we can't work on it all throughout the rest of the church year... and if we happen to need more time... if there's one or two little chinks we've overlooked... well... we'll have forty days next year to do a little more figuring out... not because God doesn't love us enough the way we are... but because God loves us too much... and wants the best out of us... for ourselves and each other... so God gives us time... and God promises us eternity...

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