

Ash Wednesday 2022: "Repent!!"  
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21  
March 2, 2022  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

I received a voicemail recently from an anonymous neighbor. She explained that she's driven past 15 churches between here and BayHead and found none of our signboards saying, "Repent!" She shared both her opinion that the world is going to end soon and her concern that Jesus is going to find a lot of us unprepared.

Her theology is a bit different than ours, but her heart is in the right place. I think she'd be surprised but glad that the message in our church today IS "Repent!" It probably is in those other 14 churches, too. On Ash Wednesday we pray:

Create in us new and honest hearts, so that, truly **repenting** of our sins, we may receive from you, the God of all mercy, full pardon and forgiveness through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord....

One of my favorite-ever bumper stickers asks, "Where am I going and why am I in this handbasket?" I don't think we need to be **told** we're "going to hell in a handbasket" to notice and 'fess up to our failures in love, our hurtful actions toward God, neighbor and self. I don't need to preach a sermon like Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," comparing us to spiders desperately dangling to a cobweb over the fiery abyss, for us to know we fall short and for us to desire to do better, by God's grace!

**You** are here in worship (either physically or virtually) on this Ash Wednesday. **You** get it. In the words of the prophet Isaiah:

*...[the suffering servant, whom we identify as our Lord Jesus]  
was wounded for our transgressions,  
crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,  
and by his bruises we are healed.*

Isaiah 53:5

Ashes created by burning last year's palm branches become the Church's magic marker today.

Ashes are rubbed on our foreheads to imprint in our memory: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." If we received only words, we could hear this as a counsel of despair: death awaits! But in addition to hearing the words we receive the sign of the cross, symbol of God's love in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus.

In earlier centuries, "big" sinners guilty of murder, adultery, heresy, were sentenced to sit on the outside steps of their church, wearing sackcloth (basically a burlap bag) and sifting ashes onto their head. This public humiliation was part of their penance: what they did **after** confessing their sin and **before** receiving absolution/forgiveness. (Not so different than people being put in the stocks, to be made fun of by passersby.) The message: unforgiven grave sin means going to hell in a handbasket! "Reorient, reorient!" demands our spiritual GPS!

Thankfully the Church isn't into public shaming these days... at least, not this part of the Church. We've taken away the sackcloth, reduced the ashes to the bare minimum, and made the imposition of ashes a once-a-year ritual for those who desire it. It is ancient practice. In a world where so much that is old is jettisoned instead of treasured, this continuity with the believers who preceded us is a beautiful thing.

Cremation has become more and more common, so we, too, definitely associate ashes with death. But they are also a symbol of cleansing. Before there were Brillo pads to scour pots, people used ashes to scrub dirty dishes. So the cross of ash reminds us of the cleansing we received when the baptismal water was poured over us "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," and the cross was first traced on our forehead with fragrant oil.

Our friend who's been scoping out local church signboards might be surprised to know that we include confession of sins in almost every service of Holy Communion. We believe that

forgiveness of sins is one of the gifts we receive in the Holy Supper, so it makes sense we would inventory them beforehand. Every Saturday night, every Sunday morning I invite you: "Let us confess our sins in the presence of God and of one another." And sometimes I think to myself, a little impishly: "You first!" As if we were going to announce our sins out loud. We're way too staid to do that, but **if** we were going to.... I might 'fess up that I put a lot less energy into loving God than God puts into loving me. I might make a clean breast of it that sometimes I forget to focus **off** whatever is worrying me and **onto** the One who promised, "*I am with you always....*" (Matt. 28:20). I might confess I let myself off the hook too easily, claiming that my impatience is "only human," instead of remembering, "Love is patient, love is kind...." (1 Cor. 13:4) I might mention that the healthy stewardship practice of setting good boundaries can also become an excuse to refuse to do what is inconvenient.

We live in a society which debates how to teach history, what parts of history to teach. Some say, "We shouldn't teach children anything that might make them feel bad about themselves." That immediately makes me think of our Sunday School, because we **do** teach our children that sins are wrong, that our selfish actions or inaction hurt God and hurt our neighbor. We teach them about the power of admitting we are wrong and telling God we are sorry, the blessing of forgiveness, the power of God's love to pick us up, dust us off, and send us on our holy way with grateful hearts, ready to serve. If we weren't sinners, we wouldn't need a Savior. Right?? But we have a Savior! A Savior who loves us well and, fully aware of our sin, hasn't rejected us because of it but has taken it upon Himself.

It's **not** depressing, it's **liberating** to talk with God about our failures in love and to ask God's forgiveness. Repentance isn't about sackcloth and ashes anymore; it's about recovery, renewal, resurrection. Lent is intended to be the springtime of the soul, not a guilt-fest. I found

this insight in Corrie ten Boom's *Clippings from My Notebook*: "Guilt never heals; its purpose is only to lead us to the Healer."<sup>1</sup>

Here's our Lenten invitation to repent from Second Corinthians, today's assigned second lesson: powerful, but without fire and brimstone:

*We're speaking for Christ himself now: Become friends with God; he's already a friend with you.*

*<sup>21</sup> How? you ask. In Christ. God put the wrong on him who never did anything wrong, so we could be put right with God.*

***6**<sup>1-3</sup> Companions as we are in this work with you, we beg you, please don't squander one bit of this marvelous life God has given us. God reminds us, I heard your call in the nick of time; The day you needed me, I was there to help.*

*Well, now is the right time to listen, the day to be helped. Don't put it off....*

Amen.

<sup>1</sup>Corrie ten Boom, *Clippings from My Notebook* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982), p. 94.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham