

Scriptures: Psalm 51:1-17; Matthew 6:1-6; 16-21; Isaiah 58:1-12

Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the season of Lent. It's a time when we consider all the ways in which God calls and changes us to be better bearers of His image. He does that most completely when we yield ourselves to Jesus Christ. When we make Him Lord of us, He puts His own Spirit within us, and over time, His Holy Spirit transforms us into living, breathing copies of Jesus Christ. Of course, the way He does that is for us to recognize that we are flawed, and in need of a Savior to reconcile us to God and the rest of humanity.

Time and time again we see this revealed in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. For instance, the Psalm we looked at this evening, Psalm 51, was written by King David. He wrote it after the prophet Nathan had confronted him about committing adultery with Uriah the Hittite's wife, Bathsheba. In his lust for Uriah's wife, David had Uriah killed so he could marry her. Despite his deep sin, God calls David a man after His own heart. David shows deep remorse – what we call penitence in the language of the Church – for the wrong he's done. Since Uriah's dead, David goes to God to seek forgiveness.

You know, when we wrong someone, we should do our best to reconcile to them. That's something we often miss today. When we sin against someone else, instead of going to them, we just take it to God. He wants us to own our actions, and to confess when we make mistakes. We all sin. That's why we need Jesus. We need to hear that we aren't perfect. A lot of times folks hear that, and they don't like hearing it!

Secret Acts of Righteousness

Jesus talks about this in the passage this evening from Matthew. "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness before people, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven,'" (Matt. 6:1). He goes on to give specific examples, such as giving to the needy, prayer, fasting, and being focused on the right stuff – building up treasures in heaven. We do that by following two very simple commandments Jesus gave in the Gospels – Love God, and love people.

Our Old Testament lesson, from the prophet Isaiah, amounts to saying the same thing. "Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to My people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins," (Isa. 58:1), God says to Isaiah. Then He gives Isaiah the specifics of what the people do – it's the same thing worldly Christians do today. "Day after day they seek Me out; they seem eager to know My ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask Me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them," (verse 2). The key word there, is "seem." It boils down to putting on a

Sunday face. Pretending to be holy – and wow, there are a lot of folks running around in the Church, even churches here in Shelby County today, doing that very thing.

They run around putting on a good act – and then when things don't go their way, people don't do what they want them to do – they lose their cool. Here again, once they realize they've done wrong, they don't go to the person they've harmed to apologize – they just pray, "please forgive me Lord," and think things are suddenly a-okay again. I'll tell you, that's not how He expects us to behave! Isaiah puts it this way: "Why have we fasted," they say, "and You have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and You have not noticed?" (verse 3). Notice what God says about this. He says, "Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high," (verse 4).

What Kind of Fast?

Most people, nowadays in our society, aren't hitting each other with wicked fists. No, today they're striking each other with wicked words. Stabbing people in the back. Making up their own narratives to explain away why they're doing what they're doing that doesn't line up with the Bible's teachings. And friends, this happens even in the Church, in general, but also here. I suspect, if we were brutally honest with ourselves this evening, each of us could identify some aspect of our life which doesn't align with Biblical standards. Whatever that area is in your personal life, that's an area ripe for growth – if you turn your heart fully over to God and allow Him to rule over you!

Look what God tells Isaiah next. I know this version is heavy on talking about men – but it equally applies to women, too. He says, "Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?" (verse 5). This is what we often think of when we think of fasts – giving things up, being humble for a day, spending time in prayer – all for show. It's precisely what Jesus was preaching against – you heard me right – Jesus preached against it – in Matthew's text. He expects a life-long commitment, and a transfiguration of our hearts – not some one-and-done feel good, "Hey, everybody, look what I've done! Now I've got my holiness booster shot for the week!" mindset.

God explains it this way. "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?" (verses 6 and 7). I know this isn't the popular thing we want to hear. Oftentimes people get real bent out of shape when you start talking about social justice issues. It's something evangelical Protestants associate with liberal progressives. We love sticking labels on people – it's a great way for us to write them off, to "cancel" them – and then give ourselves an excuse for mistreating and further objectifying them. The bottom line is this: if we aren't letting Jesus use us to break

every chain which holds all people in bondage in every sense of that word, then we aren't truly living into our calling as Christians.

Can't Turn a Blind Eye

See, there's a lot of work to do. You can't follow the Gospel of Jesus Christ and turn a blind eye on those who are marginalized. That sort of fickle faith just doesn't jive with Scripture. Being marginalized boils down to who the "haves" and the "have-nots" are in society. A hundred years ago, even into the 1960's, and in some places even today – race was a marginalizing issue for people. Women were historically marginalized people. Yet here we are, we have women pastors in the United States. The "haves" in any institution, conservative, progressive, or anywhere in-between, will always do what they can to maintain control and marginalize the "have-nots." It's human nature. We're called to actively seek justice, and to show mercy to people even when we don't like the way they live, the choices they make, their gender, or even the color of their skin. We need to start seeing people, and I mean all people – through the blood-stained lens of Jesus Christ. He sees us as all the same – all needing His grace and restoration. He sees us, and He knows we can't do it on our own.

In my high school days at Houston, I was involved for a few years in the marching band. It was a tough thing – it took a lot of coordination – I'm not a very coordinated person! Part of doing a good job in a marching band is that you have to be in-step with the rest of the band. In that process, the band director gives direction, the band members follow, and when you struggle, the members nearest to you in proximity attempt to offer correction and praise once you finally get it. Yet so often the Church tries to force people to march to the beat of a drum that's foreign to them. Some of them haven't been brought up in it, others have, and rebel against it – and rather than patiently loving and guiding them to Christ, they're told, "you're going to Hell."

Friends, "you attract more flies with honey than you do with vinegar," the old saying goes, and I'm convinced there's some Godly wisdom to it. In our doing that, we begin to truly walk in-step with God, and the rest of His band. "Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and He will say: 'Here am I,'" (verses 8-9a), God tells the prophet – and us. See, it's about a heart-change. It's all about a transformation within the individual person allowing the light of Christ to shine through, and so bring hope and relief to other people all around them.

Called to Love Others

"If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday," (verse 9b-10), God says. He's giving us a promise here. The apostle Paul talks some on this in his first letter to the church at Corinth. We're

called to love others. He writes, “If I speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames that I may boast, but have not love, I gain nothing,” (1 Cor. 13:1-3).

We can do some great stuff in ministry – local churches all over America do great stuff in ministry – but if they aren’t doing it out of love, then what’s the point? It’s worthless. It’s not reaching people, changing lives, or making an eternal impact for Jesus Christ. Friends, you can’t love someone if you’re in agreement with the status quo – with keeping them in bondage. We can’t love our brothers and sisters in the human family if we’re spending our time and energy pointing out how wrong and messed up they are. That’s not love, that’s resentment. Bitterness. While preaching fire and brimstone certainly has its place in the life of the Church, it isn’t likely to draw seekers lost in sin to Christ – it’s more likely to push them further away. Think about it. When you sin, if someone sees it and says, “Oh! Look what you did! You really messed up this time!” How does that make you feel? You feel shame, guilt, anger, right? That’s that pointing finger and malicious talk God’s telling Isaiah about which His people need to get rid of. Instead, we speak the truth with love – we gently lead them into a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ. We develop a relationship with them as people first, and then from there move into a season of speaking Biblical truth into their hearts to help them become a better follower of Christ.

When we truly repent and show remorse for what we do wrong, we examine ourselves rather than others first. We do that through the light of Holy Scripture, both the Old and the New Testaments. When we do these things, God gives us another promise. “The Lord will guide you always; He will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings,” (Isa. 58:11-12).

Lent is a forty day season of repentance, which happens every year. During this season we reflect on the journey of Jesus Christ to the cross of Good Friday, which He does because of His great love for us, and desire to reconcile the whole world with Himself. Momentarily, we’ll use ashes to remind us of our mortality and our repentance. It has a long history in Jewish and Christian worship, and serves as a visible sign of repentance. It shows that we need reconciliation with God and humanity. Traditionally, the ashes which are marked on our foreheads in the sign of the cross come from the palm branches from Palm Sunday.