

Isaiah 58:1-12

Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

2 Cor. 5:20b-6:10

“O Lord, open our lips and our mouths
shall proclaim your praise.” AMEN!

The introduction to worship class at
the Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia
went out on a very cold morning to Logan Park
to celebrate Ash Wednesday.

They met with the Welcome Church,
a congregation made up of
the unhoused community.

Everyone gathered around a plastic table
that held bread and wine.

There was a message, they marked
ashes on each other’s foreheads and
then celebrated communion.

Then the participants walked around and
offered ashes to folks on the margins.

One of those people was a man named Tyrone
who recited a poem to them.

The repeated line of the poem was
“Nobody really knows I am homeless.”

Part of the poem described the way he felt.

Invisible, ignored, scorned.

He said he walks around and no one notices him,
no one makes eye contact,
no one really acknowledges his presence.

One of the seminary students said,

“While we spoke to Tyrone, he revealed
that he was walking ashes while alive.”

It made no sense to put ashes on his forehead
because he knew better than any of us
what it means to remember mortality,
sacrifice, and prayer. (Pause)

As we put ashes on our foreheads tonight,
we need such reminders,

but people like Tyrone live it everyday.

Perhaps our walk through Lent this year will
be one that recalls our need to walk alongside
the unsheltered.

Allow them to remind us of our mortality
when we look them in the eye and
work to make them visible in society.

Let the ashes remind us of our temporary-ness and

lead us to pay attention to the inequality
in our society and the absence of justice
that is embedded in the system
that makes a small group super-rich

and a large portion of society - invisible. (Pause)

Psalm 51 calls us tonight.

“Have mercy on me, O God.
Wash me through and through and
cleans me from my sin.”

What does being cleansed from sin mean in
a culture that is driven by algorithmic attention?

The swell of social platforms that will do or
say just about anything in order to keep
people watching brings about a horrific
kind of consumerism.

Even those who started on the right foot,
for honorable reasons that speak truth,
quite often find themselves selling out
their morals to gain views.

In order to keep people watching,
the content gets more and more extreme. (Pause)

This ability to pay attention was the key
to the section we read just now from

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

Pay attention to the way you give,
to the way you pray, and
to the way you fast.

Don't fall asleep and do them
to draw attention or get people to notice you,
and me.

These actions disgusted Jesus because
he could see the ways people pretended and lied.

Jesus was disgusted by hypocrisy because
he saw through what people were doing.

They fulfilled selfish desires while having
the appearance of being just. (Pause)

The good news is, Ash Wednesday calls us back.

Psalm 51 reminds us of what we often sing:

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.

Cast me not away from your presence, and
take not your Holy Spirit from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation and uphold me,
with your free Spirit.

These words, from the psalm, teach all
who wander away from God to return and
be delivered from bloodshed, hypocrisy,
and selfishness.

We open our lips to declare God's praise. (Pause)

"Return to the Lord, your God."

Not because your pastor (or anyone else) says so,
but because God says so.

You see, God does for humanity what we struggle
or find impossible to do.

God forgives and reconciles.

At its heart, forgiveness is about releasing
the debt that is owed.

It's about not choosing to cling to resentment or revenge.

When you and I forgive, we are following
an inner act of God within us, even if
the other person never apologizes, or changes.

From this inner act, we are brought freedom
by loosening the hold of anger and bitterness
that can weigh down our own well-being.

The amazing thing that God also does is to reconcile,
or restore the relationship.

We can forgive without reconciliation,
especially when the other continues
to behave inappropriately or abusively.

In those instances, boundaries must be kept
and sometimes relationships ended, but
with God there is always
the promise of reconciliation.

God offers shared life and trust even
after the wrong is done.

Ash Wednesday reminds us of that, too.

For we all fall short of the glory of God, and
are prone to wander.

And as the ashes smudge our foreheads,
we grasp that death is inevitable, so we can
live life admitting our days are numbered.

As our life span decreases day by day,
we live fully in the moment of today. (Pause)

We don't pray for help to do better,
although we know there's room for improvement.

We pray for God to create in us, clean hearts.

The same verb used in Genesis when
God created the world.

It is a bold prayer, when you stop to consider it,
a prayer which implies that even when our
hearts feel ruined, God is able to do
something new inside us, manage the guilt,
and lift us to be able to stand in God's presence.

AMEN!