

A Ministry of Reconciliation

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Ash Wednesday; Series C

God said to Adam, “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3:19). Is it possible to receive more sobering words? And lest we forget, these are God’s words. Our Lord speaks words to Adam that are straightforward and blunt. The first man and woman had disobeyed God and chose to doubt his goodness. They gave into the temptation to rise above their creatureliness. Now they are separated from him. Their disobedience and ungodliness is not a mild, treatable problem. It is a chronic, hereditary disease that is passed on from generation to generation, without exception. Now an entire creation is born separated from God, ungodly, unholy, and not trusting in their Creator and his goodness. Now death comes onto the scene. For, what is death but separation? It is separation from God and from those we love. We need no one to remind us that death is separation.

Yet, every year, as the Church, we deliberately and intentionally take time to remember the sobering truth that we are unholy, that this un-holiness is sin that leads to death (James 1:15), and that death is separation. Every year, while the rest of the world is recovering from Mardi Gras, we, the faithful, gather on a Wednesday evening, stand in a single file line, and we remember. We hear those words, “Remember, you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” And it doesn’t matter the age, the gender, or the race. Young heads receive the same ashen cross as those much older. We all get the same black, cross-shaped mark, the same words. The words that the first man and woman received when they fell from grace are the same words we receive. The medical condition is the same and so the words of the diagnosis are the same—“Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

It is good to remember, though. When we take time to remember a person, an event, or in this case, the reality of our sinful condition, the act of remembrance can stir up a lot of emotions that can be good for us. Emotions are stirred when we see pictures of loved ones who have died or when we hear trigger words or phrases like “9/11” or “Sandy Hook Elementary School.” When we see the pictures and hear the trigger words we may stop and think and reflect for a little while. This is why we have Ash Wednesday. This is why we come forward, receive the ashes, and hear the words. The ritual causes us to reflect more deeply on our own frailty, our own mortality, the consequences of our own sinful condition, and our own inability to do anything about it.

Most of us, when we feel a cold coming on, or discover that we are sick, we try to do something about it. We launch into preventative mode or research treatments. I recently came down with a cold and am still dealing with it. My first thought was, “Oh no, I better get this thing under control, I have two services to lead this week!” It is common to want to solve a problem once we are aware of its existence.

Ash Wednesday reminds us of the existence of the problem of original sin, death, and eternal separation from God. However, what makes this problem so devastating is that *we can’t solve it on our own!* In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus speaks the “Sermon on the Mount” to the crowds and he says, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal” (Mt 6:19). Jesus is writing to people who are trying to solve

the problem on their own. They are trying to solve the problem by giving alms to the needy, praying long prayers, and fasting with disfigured faces. They assume that their efforts will not only gain the attention of men, but also earn them favor with God. And so Jesus has to remind them that their attempts are nothing more than searching on earth for a solution, a treasure, which can only be found in heaven.

In our Epistle lesson this evening, the Apostle Paul joins Jesus in diagnosing the problem. Paul says to the Corinthians, “Be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:20b). That word reconciliation means “reunion” or “resolution.” These are Paul’s Ash Wednesday words. He reminds us of the same thing that Jesus reminds us—we are separated from God and cannot solve the problem on our own. In Paul’s words to the Corinthians, he gives the cure to the problem that began with the fall from grace. His words are as straightforward and blunt as God’s words to Adam. A Ministry of reconciliation is what is needed—“Be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:20b).

When Paul says these words to the Corinthians he is not expecting them to look to themselves or within themselves to find the solution. He is not saying that they must “lay up for themselves treasures on earth” in order to bring about a “reunion” with God and a “resolution” to the problem of sin, death, and eternal separation. It becomes very clear that Paul points them heavenward to the solution that comes down to them.

Immediately after diagnosing the problem of eternal separation from God as a result of Sin, the Apostle Paul gives the solution. We don’t initiate this family reunion. Rather, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). Paul doesn’t stop with the ashes and the reminder of our mortality. He doesn’t end with the separation. He presses on to the Second Adam who brings immortality and reconciliation through death and resurrection, and the gift of forgiveness of sins. By purchasing forgiveness of sins through the death and resurrection of Christ, God made a way for you and me and all people to be holy and united to him once again. Paul presses on to remind all Christians, you and me, that just as God created man from dust, so too through Christ he will bring man to a new, restored, eternal life with him from the dust and ashes of the grave (Rom 5:10-17). Separation and death is no longer the end for those who are found “in Christ.” Immortality, reconciliation, reunion, and a peaceful resolution is the final word. Yet, as we take time to remember again this Lenten Season, the ministry of reconciliation comes at a price.

The Apostle Paul speaks of the high price God has paid to overcome the ashes and reunite us with him. He paid the high price of suffering and death. When Paul writes to the Corinthians he writes to them not just as an Apostle, but as a minister of reconciliation. The ministry or service of reconciliation is carried into the world even after Christ ascended into heaven. Apostles like Paul and pastors today carry out this Ministry publically on Sunday mornings as well as at other times. Furthermore, all of us carry out the ministry of reconciliation as we bring God’s forgiveness into our homes and our personal friendships and relationships. We bring a ministry that has the power to raise new life from ashes.

As we carry out the ministry of reconciliation throughout the Season of Lent and beyond, remember one more thing. Faithfulness to this ministry of reconciliation also comes at a price. Paul gives us a glimpse of the cost as he rattles off a flourish of phrases, “But as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger . . .” (2 Cor 6:4-5). We can expect hardship as faithful partakers of the ministry of reconciliation in Christ. But even in the midst of the difficulties there is hope. We continue our mortal lives with an eternal hope even as we regularly partake of the medicine of immortality in the body and blood of our Lord, continually hear the words of forgiveness from our God, and return daily to the promise of new life as his child that our Lord made at our Baptism. And so we can say with the Apostle Paul while we await our final day on earth, “I am ‘sorrowful yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything’” (2 Cor 6:10). Amen.