

Ash Wednesday  
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During the past few weeks leading up to what the media has been calling Super Tuesday, in the race for the presidential election this year, I couldn't help but feel a bit disappointed to hear the many candidates talk about the need for change in our country. Now I too believe we need change in many different areas, but the reason I felt that way was because it reminded me of how broken and shattered our world is. And it's probably much worse than we would care to admit.

Although the tragedy of 9/11 occurred nearly 20 years ago, we still live with the effects of that tragedy, and are prone to submitting ourselves to fear and intimidation. Our nation lives in a world of broken relationships, not only with our enemies, but also with longtime allies of the United States in Europe and Asia, who no longer see eye to eye with our foreign policy. We live with the daily news of shattered lives from shootings in our streets, and there are millions of displaced people hanging on to life by living in refugee camps, we currently have more displaced people than in the history of humankind. The devastating effects of natural disasters across the world, and within our own borders, so affects us, that with news of just the possibility of rough weather we are sent running for shelter. And now we have the coronavirus to deal with. We can no longer hide our heads in the sand and hope that danger will pass us by. We have death and destruction as our daily companion.

Against this backdrop, our service on this Ash Wednesday begins, as ashes are smeared on our foreheads, with the chilling words, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." Do we need this to remind us of how fragile life is? Haven't we been bombarded with messages and images that strike fear and make it nearly impossible to deny the inevitability of loss and death. Aren't there other words that might be better suited to the occasion?

And yet as we enter the season of repentance and renewal called Lent, we need to both speak and hear these words as much now as ever. These words along with the cross of Christ on our foreheads, remind of what is, and of a promise, of what will be.

For the ashes on our foreheads remind us of that, because like Adam and Eve, made from the dust of the ground, we too have been created by God. We are in this world because God loved us and formed us. And like Adam and Eve and all humankind, we have all rebelled against God through sin, and so we share in their judgment, for all have fallen short of the will of God. Like our primordial parents, we will die and return to the dust of the ground. Lent is a time when we strip away all the frills and learn to face this grim reality in a new way with truthfulness and courage.

But there is another reality that we also face, that's just as real as death. And we do not face this reality with shame, but with renewed hope and joy. It is the reality of God's love and forgiveness. For God is working in us at all times. The sign of the cross on

our foreheads serves not only to remind us that we are dust, but also as a reminder that God has made a claim on us in baptism. Through baptism God is forever in relationship with us and promises to always be there. And God is faithful to his promises. In his boundless mercy and love, God through Jesus Christ forgives us all our sins and even prepares a place for us that we might live with him in eternity. We do not know just what glory awaits us at the end of our lives, but we do know that our final destiny is to be filled with love, as we live in peace with Christ Jesus our Lord.

The grace of God is as great as the oceans, as boundless as stars scattered throughout the universe, and yet what God desires most from us is to return to him, to give our lives to him, to repent, and cry out,

“Create in me a clean heart, O God and renew a right Spirit in me.”

During the next 40 days, during this season of Lent, I can’t think of a more appropriate theme, than that, Create in me a clean heart O God, and renew a right spirit in me. And Jesus helps us understand what it is to have that “right Spirit” within us in our gospel reading for this evening, where he talks about giving, praying, and fasting.

Let’s examine ourselves for a moment about our giving, whether that is to the church, or to the poor, or to other charities that live for the benefit of others. Do we give on a regular basis, or because we’ve been asked. Is giving a natural part of our lives or do we have to consciously force ourselves to do it, only after figuring out what we can afford after all our other expenses. Can we really afford to give like that?

The church and all those important charities practically have to beg us for our gifts. Have we forgotten that all we have is a gift to us? Everything – from life itself to all our material possessions, they are all a gift from God. When we factor in God’s gift of eternal life, we are rich beyond what we think or imagine.

Jesus explains to us where our treasure is, there our heart will be also. So create in me a clean heart O God and renew a right Spirit in me.

Jesus teaching on prayer suggests that our praying should not be acting. We should not be playing to the crowds or pretending, praying needs to be sincere. We’ve all seen the couple who make every effort to show the world around them how much they love each other. They hang all over each other, kiss constantly, look fondly at each other, embracing as if no one is looking, but in all reality, they’re just playing to the crowd. That is not how we might have the right spirit in us. Jesus says when we are praying, remember who it is we’re talking to. God doesn’t need an audience, and God already knows our needs, so pray in secret where we can be honest and open with God and ourselves. And pray all the time so that we Keep God with us wherever we are.

Jesus also advises us to practice fasting in order to renew a right spirit within us. Fasting is not a familiar practice among us, except when we’ve put ourselves on some new diet, but in a day when luxuries are considered necessities, probably the best way for us to fast and understand what truly are necessities, is by giving up our luxuries.

Just consider how indulgent our lives have become. We buy just about anything we want, we eat anything we want, we go wherever we want, we buy more than we can use, we waste food at a phenomenal amount, our garages are filled to capacity, we rent storage units just to hold our excess. So when we consider giving something up for Lent, there's plenty of room for fasting.

So as we come to God and ask him "to create in me a clean heart, and renew a right spirit in me" these next 40 days of Lent, perhaps it's time for us to start using less and giving more, perhaps it's time for us to pray with more insight into what we are praying about, perhaps it's time to consider what is truly necessary in our self-indulgent lives, for then we will see our Lord and Savior more clearly, and know him more intimately, and appreciate and love him more fully.

Amen.