

**Sermon for Ash Wednesday****Joel 2:12-17**

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March 9, 2011 — Ash Wednesday

We opened the service this evening with that sombre, but wonderful hymn of confession written by Martin Luther. From the first verse to the last verse, the words are those of a man who truly understood where he stood as a sinner before a holy and just God: “From depths of woe I cry to Thee.” Those are the words of a man who deeply mourned his sins. And yet they’re also the words of a man who knew very well where he stood as a sinner before a *loving and gracious* God. He implores God with *confidence*: “Bend down Thy gracious ear to me.” He prays in the last verse:

*Though great our sins and sore our woes,  
His grace much more aboundeth;  
His helping love no limit knows,  
Our utmost need it soundeth.  
Our Shepherd good and true is He,  
Who will at last His Israel free  
From all their sin and sorrow.*

He knew, as St. Paul teaches us in Romans 6, that the greater our sin, the more God’s grace abounds in forgiveness. We certainly see this in our lesson from the second chapter of Joel. Through the prophet, God calls to the people of Judah:

**“Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
consecrate a fast;  
call a solemn assembly;  
gather the people.  
Consecrate the congregation;  
assemble the elders;  
gather the children,  
even nursing infants.  
Let the bridegroom leave his room,  
and the bride her chamber.”** (Joel 2:15-17)

That’s the call from God: consecrate a fast for the whole nation. But why? He says in verses 12 and 13:

**“Yet even now,” declares the LORD,  
“return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting, with weeping, and with  
mourning;**

**and rend your hearts and not your  
garments.”**

**Return to the LORD your God,  
for he is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, and abounding in  
steadfast love;  
and he relents over disaster.**

Now, Judah got herself into trouble with God throughout her history. She sinned and apostasised repeatedly, prostituting herself to foreign Gods, failing to trust in the Lord, even to the point of falling under God’s judgement, losing everything, and being carried off into exile. And yet Joel wasn’t writing to a people who were worshipping false gods or who were engaged as a nation in gross sin. Joel was writing to the Jews *after* the exile, after they had faithfully rebuilt Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple. Spiritually speaking, this was one of the better times for Judah. In fact, Joel’s prophecy isn’t so much the fire and brimstone variety. It’s a prophecy of comfort. The high point of Joel is his prophecy of the coming Messiah who will bring God’s covenant to fruition. And yet in the middle of a time when the people were—at least by human standards—doing reasonably well before God and in the middle of a word of comfort, he calls them to a penitential fast. And that’s where I see this being particularly applicable to us.

During the season of Lent, the Church calls us to “consecrate a fast”. Our first reaction might be to ask: “Why? What did we do?” The Jews probably asked the same thing of Joel: “Why a fast? What did we do?” We look at our lives; we haven’t done anything too terribly heinous. None of us has killed anyone; we haven’t been oppressing widows and orphans; we haven’t set up altars to Buddha, to Vishnu, or to the Great Spirit in our church. What did we do that deserves a fast? The Church calls out to us too: “Even now, return to me with *all* your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.” And we ask: “Am I not serving you with my whole heart already? Is there some sin in my life I need to be weeping over?”

Last week I was looking for music to use this evening. I had those words of Luther in my head—his hymn is one that can’t be topped for Ash Wednesday. But I went through our binders of contemporary songs—hundred if not thousands of songs—and there was absolutely nothing that came close. Nothing at all truly

penitential in nature. I looked online for other songs. I didn’t find anything. And that told me that modern Christians need the same kind of reminder that God gave to Judah through Joel. We think we’re doing just fine. The only worship we can comprehend is worship that’s upbeat, happy, and feel-good. No one seems to write music that expresses real penitence anymore.

But Joel reminds us that even when we think we’re doing well, we really do still stand before God as sinners saved by grace. This is why the Church bring us to the season of Lent every year—it’s also why every Friday, at least in theory, is supposed to be a day of fasting and abstinence. We need these regular reminders that we cannot and do not stand on our own two feet before God—we enter his presence clothed in the borrowed robe of Christ’s righteousness. Lent keeps us from forgetting—even if it only keeps us from forgetting by sending us on a hunt for appropriate songs. When we can’t find them, it ought to be a red flag that something in the Church has broken—that we’re not as different from ancient Judah as we might think.

As part of our fast, God gives us an important reminder: “Rend your hearts and not your garments.” And this may be where he gets our attention. The times when we think we’re doing pretty well spiritually, are often the times when we’ve fallen into the trap of simply doing the externals of religion. That was the problem we see that the Jews had—over and over, they thought they were doing the right thing, precisely because they were doing the right *things*. That was the problem Jesus condemned in the Pharisees. And we’re prone to the same thing. We fall into the mindset that says, “I’ve been going to church on Sundays, I’ve been reading a chapter a day in my Bible, I’ve been praying each day for so many minutes, I’ve done this, this, and that good thing each day...and I haven’t done that, that, or that sinful thing.” All those things may be good signs, but they may also be a sign that we’ve fallen into a religion of externals—a religion that’s based on trying to appeal to God or on trying to please him and earn his favour based on what we do. Maybe it’s more subtle. Maybe we truly do believe we’re saved by faith in what Christ has done for us, not by anything we do, but we start to take the love of Jesus at the cross for granted.

That's when we need the reminder too, that the Church isn't just calling us to another annual fast as something else to *do*. She's calling us to *really* fast—to take advantage of the externals of self-denial and abstinence in order to teach our hearts once again about love. If we want to know what love looks like, Jesus is our model. As we saw this past Sunday, he went to the cross—offering himself as a sacrifice for sins—because he loves us. The self-denial that we practice during Lent is meant to be a tangible reminder to us of the self-denial that Jesus practiced—the ultimate gift of love. This is the important thing about Lent—the thing that gives it meaning, that I see people over and over forgetting. It's the thing that turns Lent from being something to groan about, to something to find joy in. The purpose of our self-denial is to give us an opportunity to reflect on the love of Christ and on the blood he shed for us on the cross. And if we can understand and remember that, then I don't think we can help but come before God as his Church fasting, mourning and weeping and with rent hearts, but also in penitential joy. We can come to God, as we'll sing in the next hymn:

*With broken heart and contrite sigh,  
A trembling sinner, Lord, I cry:  
Thy par'dning grace is rich and free:  
O God, be merciful to me.*

And we know that his grace runs to us rich and free because we know that we are his people. We turn to the Lord in confidence, not to make him our own, but because he has made us *his* own. We are his people, and he promises to be gracious and merciful to his people, abounding in steadfast love. He has established a covenant with us. Think back to the Old Testament. The saints of the Old Testament came to God through a covenant established by the blood of the Passover lamb, which was killed, and whose blood they painted on the doorposts of their houses in Egypt so that the angel of God's vengeance would *pass over* that house. Brothers and sisters, you and I are now living under a new covenant that was established in the blood of Jesus—by the blood of the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. In that covenant God has contracted: “I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

As we come to his Table to eat and drink, we affirm our membership in that covenant. When Jesus gave the wine to his disciples on the night before his death, he said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood.” When we drink it with faith, believing his promise, we affirm his covenant of forgiveness and become partakers of the forgiveness Jesus purchased when he gave his body and shed his blood. God looks on what Jesus did at the cross as if had been done by everyone who enters into that covenant by faithfully eating and drinking the Lord's body and blood together with the bread and wine here at his Table. God “contracts” with his Church that he will credit us with everything that Jesus has purchased by his suffering and death. No matter how many sins we've each racked up, when we take part in his forgiveness, he wipes our slates clean. He credits to us Jesus' perfect fulfillment of the law, his perfect obedience to the will of God, his full atonement for every sin—his payment in full and his fulfillment of the punishment that the law demands.

And so with our sins out of the way, there's nothing left to separate us from our holy God. We are his people, his children, the brothers and sisters of his Son. God's children have all their needs met and they have the attention of their loving Father. And that means that we can trust him to provide everything we need *in order to be faithful*. He feeds us with the bread of life as we take in his Word—when we hear it read, when we read it for ourselves, when we hear it preached, and when the Word Incarnate comes to us at his Table. His Word protects us, guards us, and grows us as we take part in the covenant of his blood—as we eat and drink in faith.

But we also need to remember that a covenant has two sides. A contract has no legal force unless both sides agree to it. The old covenant wasn't all on God's side. He didn't just say, “I will be their God.” Israel had to agree to the second part: “We will be your people and serve you as our God.” And the *new* covenant is in force when *we* enter it. It's not enough for us to freely accept what God offers. We need to accept his gift with the understanding and declaration that we are submitting ourselves to him as his people—a people who have been freed from sin and from the eternal consequences of sin, so that we

can serve him in righteousness and holiness forever. Jesus has bought us to be his own, and we need to live as becomes the followers of the Son of God!

And so today we enter into this season of preparation for Easter. By our baptism we were each buried with Christ into death, and just as he was raised from the dead, we should also walk in newness of life. That newness of life—a life of Christ-like love—is what Lent trains us in. During these weeks, look at your life and as you study the Scriptures, ask the Holy Spirit to open your eyes to the places where your old life is still present and to the places where it's crept back in. No matter how good we think we're doing spiritually, just as the Jews in Joel's day, we need a reminder that we're still struggling sinners. God's promise is that his Holy Spirit will make us holy as he removes everything from our lives that isn't consistent with our covenant relation with God and everything that's contrary to our profession of being servants of Jesus Christ. Our aim and our purpose during Lent is that when at Easter we see Jesus raised from the dead, he will find us prepared and ready to enter into newness of life with him.

Let us pray: “Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing that you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent: make in us new and contrite hearts so that, lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, we may receive from you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”