

Ash Wednesday year B

Isaiah 58:1-12

2Cor. 5:20b-6:10

Matt. 6:1-6, 16-21

Ever since I was little I have always felt a sense of relief and comfort at the beginning of Lent. I like to call this season my **license to lament** because frankly, I believe that we, as Episcopalians, aren't given enough opportunities to really bewail our sins. Sometimes during worship services throughout the year I find myself wanting to strike my chest during the Confession but I feel I can't because it isn't time to do that yet. Maybe there are many others of you who also feel that if we aren't in Lent I can't beat my chest or display a dramatic action of repentance, which is really too bad because there is a wonderful power in bringing out the feelings inside of us through visible actions.

Now, I am not saying I want us to develop callouses on our knees or use lashes on our own backs until they bleed, what I AM saying is we have to stop avoiding the painful side of being human. We have to acknowledge that the forgiveness of sins we receive from God through Jesus Christ is an awesome, overpowering fact that sometimes just has to manifest itself through our actions.

In the Old Testament times when a person wanted to repent their sins they would go unwashed and leave their hair un-anointed. They would wear itchy sackcloth and smear themselves with a heap of ashes. And we hear today that repentant Jewish people would make a big, public display of their fasting even though the act of fasting was meant to show humility, sorrow and dependence on God. That is why Jesus calls these men “hypocrites”. The word “hypocrite” was not used in the time that the scriptures were translated the same way we use it to today. “Hypocrite” is the Greek word for actor.

Someone who pretended to be something they were not. Jesus was opposed to the Jewish leaders public piety. He not only realized that these men were saying one thing and doing another but he knew their outward actions were used as substitutes for a true inward, private relationship with God. ...as Matthew Henry the famous author of an exhaustive Bible commentary said.... The “hypocrite’s” actions were the “show and shadow without the substance”.

Jesus was not denouncing the practice of almsgiving, prayer and fasting in his criticizing public displays of penance. IN fact we know Jesus fasted at crucial times in his ministry and later put great importance on alms giving and prayer. But, what I hear him saying to us today is a personal relationship with God should come before any public display. And a personal relationship with God does not begin with public acts of piety, it begins with a contrite heart, a personal confession of sins and a sincere request for forgiveness.

I think what Jesus was trying to tell the hypocrites then and us now is that our bend towards sin, that leaning we have to do what we know we shouldn't, should not prevent us from closing our bedroom door and talking to God in secret. In fact the author of Isaiah reminds us that God wants us to close that door and draw near.

As humans, our natural response to this close, intimate relationship with God that Jesus describes is fear maybe because of our belief that we can't possibly live up to God's standards. So, we reckon some of the sins we commit don't warrant God's attention. Jesus must have known how easy it is for us to confess and publicly renounce the "BIG" sins we commit that grieve us and that we know will separate us from God –the kind of sins we think God really cares about.-But do we recognize the sins that we repeat over and over as the stumbling blocks they really are to a righteous relationship with God ?

Let me explain, Do we consider a tidbit of good gossip a sin? Do we think it's a sin when we describe someone's actions as being a result of them being, African American, Hispanic, Muslim, poor, rich, female or male? Do we think that there are times when a child deserves to be smacked, or are there situations where we can refuse to stand up for an innocent victim? These are just some of the acts that we may engage in that chip away and weaken our relationship with God, our neighbor, and even with our selves. They and all other sins that bar us from right relationships are deeds that we must acknowledge, confess and make amends for.

Russell Connors in his book Character, Choices and Community explains it like this: "It is the sins we have gotten used to committing, that we've grown comfortable with, (like an old pair of slippers) that are really dangerous." ...these sinful habits are the things that harden our hearts against the moral tug and deafen our consciences to the sound of God's voice".

When I read this I thought ..what a true gift it is to know that **God's** heart is not hardened by our habitual sin -what a blessing it is to know that **God** is not deaf to **our** voices. And we must never forget why this is true, it's because Jesus lived - and it's because he suffered his death that you and I can meet God again and again on an intimate basis to confess both our "Big" and our comfortable sins.

Today, Ash Wednesday, we must remember , as a Church and as individuals, that God isn't waiting for grand, public acts of piety from us. God isn't waiting for us to smudge ourselves with soot and live on an ash heap. God isn't waiting for us to put on a bag made of smelly goat hair and walk down 81 while bewailing our sins. God isn't waiting for us to faint with hunger because we gave up eating.

On the contrary, what God IS waiting for us to do, I think : is to give up our little sins, God is waiting to help us lift our own bonds of wickedness; to undo the thongs of our yokes and to let us who are burdened by our guilt go free .

Directly after this sermon you will be invited to begin the observance of Lent. A mark on the forehead in Biblical tradition is a sign of ownership and just like at your Baptism you will be marked as Christ 's own, belonging to him, forever. The imposition of Ashes is a powerful act of public piety and confession. But it should not be the only way we relate to God.

The visible mark you receive will remind you that you have begun an inward reflection on what prevents you from having right relationships --it can and should be our "license to lament" . The Cross of Ashes you will wear is an outward display that God wants to forgive our sins and now is the acceptable time to privately dwell on the fact that Jesus- nailed to that cross- is our avenue to God's very heart. Amen.