

**Ash Wednesday**

**2/26/2020**

**Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 103; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**

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Apple illustration...

Most apples look good...

Check for bruises...

Some look great but some are soft on the inside and yet some are crisp.

Hollow sound or a dense sound.

Flick the apple next to your ear and you can hear if it is a good apple.

When I was much younger, before I knew how to listen to an apple...

I picked up an apple in my house... I checked it... It looked good...

and I took a bite... only to find part of a worm in it.

I didn't notice the small hole on the other side of the apple.

You see the outside is not always an indicator of what is on the inside.

We still today as a society put so much emphasis on the appearance of people.

Our brand is important...

Our image on social media...

The public relations industry is now a 19-billion-dollar industry...

It has grown by almost a billion a year over the last 5 years.

Even in the midst of some cultural push back

(like the #metoo movement) ...

our visual culture still gets mesmerized by what we see and hear.

I recently read a job description of the average pastor...

It mentions words such as visionary, administrative, skilled, balanced, creative, leader, authentic walk with Jesus... etc.

But there is no mention of the word character or integrity.

As for leaders... I heard a pastor once say:

*Don't let your talent and giftings take you where your character can't keep you.*

That's advice we should all heed.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus is talking about image, hypocrisy, integrity and culture.

It's part of the Sermon on the Mount...

Jesus' foremost sermon found in the Gospel of Matthew chapters 5,6, and 7.

Jesus said:

*Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them...*

So simple...

Don't do acts, good deeds, and such so that people will think highly of you... to build up your public relations image.

Then Jesus gives a few examples...

He says:

*So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.*

...

*And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.*

Jesus was pointing out hypocrisy...

Looking good on the outside but being rotten on the inside.

You see, the Sermon on the Mount exposes the state of the heart...

Believer... non-believer.

Rich... poor.

Male... female.

Doesn't matter... we are all broken.

19<sup>th</sup> century Russian author Ivan Turgenev wrote:

*I do not know what the heart of a bad man is like, but I do know what the heart of a good man is like, and it is terrible.*

The prophet Jeremiah said:

*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?*

(Jeremiah 17:9)

Later in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus said:

*For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.*

(Matthew 15:19)

We all sin...

We all fall short of God's glory (Romans 3:23)

And yet we think we can hide it...

And we might at least for a season in the eyes of the world...

In the eyes of our peers...

But not from God.

Three times in our Gospel reading Jesus said:

*...your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

God knows what we do...

What we do in the open... and what we do in secret.

We are reminded of this every Sunday in our collect for purity...

We begin worship with this prayer:

*Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desire known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit...*

We are all broken...

We are all sinful...

We are unable to redeem ourselves.

And so, we come to Ash Wednesday.

A day we receive ashes on our forehead...

A sign of our mortality and penitence...

Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent where we practice self-examination and repentance by prayer, fasting, self-denial, and reading and meditating on God's holy Word.

But it is also a day that we are reminded of God's favor toward us...

A day that we remember that it is only by God's gracious gift that we are given everlasting life.

That although we have all sinned...  
there is a way that has been made...  
to receive the forgiveness of our sins.

Jesus Christ...  
despite our brokenness...  
despite our sin...  
Even though we lack belief and trust...  
Even though we think we know best...

Jesus Christ still went to the cross for our redemption.  
Jesus Christ knowing full well who we really are...  
died for us so that a way would be made for us to spend eternity with  
him.

It is by his suffering that we receive healing.

It is by his wounds we receive peace.

And when we truly confess Jesus as Lord and Savior...

He fills us with His Spirit so that we can have eternal life.

And in his kindness, he gives us mercy...

We don't receive what we deserve.

And in his love, he gives us grace...

We receive all that it means to be children of God.

This is why the words from our Psalm today ring so true...

Listen once again:

*The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, \**

*slow to anger and of great kindness.*

*He will not always accuse us, \**

*nor will he keep his anger for ever.*

*He has not dealt with us according to our sins, \**

*nor rewarded us according to our wickedness.*

*For as the heavens are high above the earth, \**

*so is his mercy great upon those who fear him.*

*As far as the east is from the west, \**

*so far has he removed our sins from us.*

*As a father cares for his children, \**

*so does the Lord care for those who fear him.*

That... is the promise of Ash Wednesday.

Ash Wednesday is not a day to live in guilt.

However, it is a day to recognize our brokenness and humanity...

And it is a day we trust in God's love.

It's a day we come before God and by his grace we can declare:

"I am human, I am dust, and yet... you still love me."

God loves you so much...

I pray on this day...

In this season of Lent...

That you will accept that great love of God in your life.

Receive his forgiveness and grace today.

I leave you with one last verse... a song of David to the Lord...

from Psalm 17:8...

David wrote:

*Keep me as the apple of your eye;*

*And hide me in the shadow of your wings*

May that define our Season of Lent.

Amen.