

Ash Wednesday, February 25, 2009  
Isaiah 58:1-12, 2 Cor. 5:20b-6:10  
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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Tonight we begin our journey through Lent on Ash Wednesday, the first of the 40 days preceding Holy Week and Easter. In the Christian understanding of scripture, 40 is an important number: it relates to the 40 days Noah spent in the ark, the 40 years Israel spent traveling to the promised land after the exodus, and the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness after his baptism that marked the beginning of his ministry. For us, today, the season of Lent is an invitation to 40 days of renewal.

Lent gives us 40 days to prepare ourselves to receive the good news of Easter – isn't it wonderful that we have this opportunity each and every year as we enter this season – of course we have daily chances for renewal and reconciliation but let's look at this yearly invitation in a new way. Because the reality is, I think, that we can't truly celebrate Easter without the work of Lent, the sorrow of Holy Week – we all know as we gather tonight that Easter is more than a spring celebration, a chance for families to get together; it's more than bunnies, brightly colored eggs, and candy. I loved Tom's explanation to the confirmands this week – we can't go from Santa Claus to bunnies and be at all serious about our faith. So, let's make this journey together – perhaps in a new and more profound way.

Many of us have been taught that Lent is a time of sometimes painful self-examination, when we scrutinize our habits, our spiritual practices, and our very lives – hoping to make ourselves better, trying to make ourselves worthy of the love of God. We “ramp up” our prayer, fasting, and self-denial in order to remove worldly distractions from our lives. And we take on Bible study, classes, and service projects in order to add meaning and depth to our existence.

For some children and adults too, Lent means no candy. Or a coin in the box whenever we say a bad word. For some adults, it may be consuming less meat or alcohol, or attending that Lenten program at the church.

Lent is known as a time of sacrifice – of giving something up. And that's true in a way- it is a time of repentance, of forgiveness – of course that's one meaning of the Lenten season as we move toward Easter.

But that's not exactly what Paul is telling us in the Corinthians passage. He calls us to be reconciled to God. And his way of being reconciled may surprise us. Paul does not suggest a confession, or propose any self-examination, or lay out a lengthy program or exercise. He tells us that we should simply accept the grace of God when the time is right, and, behold, now is that acceptable time.

Not after enduring a forty-day fast. Not after lengthy Bible study. Not even after we pray, but now, here, today: be reconciled to God. And Paul not only invites us to be reconciled to God, he actually beseeches us. That is, he pleads, implores, presses, begs, and demands. “We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ... Now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation.”

Couldn't this mean a whole new kind of Lenten discipline? Instead of putting our hand into the refiner's fire, we could be dancing in the flames of love's delight. Instead of seeking to squelch the voice of sin within us, we would be cultivating the sounds of joy. Instead of wallowing in our guilt, we would be reveling in our gratitude. For not only did God create us, and everything there is; not only is all of creation wonderfully good; and not only are we offered the grace of God; but we are also offered that again, and again, and again by the awesome love God has for each and every one of us – all the time.

We are offered God's love in times of hardship, affliction, and tumult; in times of hunger, calamity, and sickness; and in times of peace, surplus, and prosperity

We are offered God's love both in times of distress and in times of accomplishment; in times of triumph and in times of failure; in times of righteousness and in times of sin.

Yes, we are offered God's love even when we sin. When we do things we know are wrong; when we hurt ourselves or others; when we lie, cheat and steal: that is when God loves us most. Because when we sin, we need God even more. We need courage to turn away from darkness and to face the light. We need daring to turn away from the world's false comforts and to accept the enduring grace of God. And we need faith to turn away from death, and face the new life that is freely given to all of us.

God has put no obstacle in anyone's way. God finds no fault in anyone's ministry. And so, as servants of God, we are called to commend ourselves in every way. We are called to seek those qualities Paul writes about: purity, knowledge, forbearance, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God.

Some of these are character traits we can cultivate in ourselves. We can commit ourselves anew to promote forbearance through patience, to emulate purity through simplicity, to encourage knowledge through study, to foster kindness through gentleness, and to nurture truthful speech.

The rest are not things that are up to us, really. They are not results of our labors, or products of our will. The Holy Spirit, genuine love, and the power of God are not up to us. There is nothing we can do to create these, nothing we can do to snuff them out.

But we do have a choice. And that choice is whether to allow ourselves to be led by the Holy Spirit, whether to let genuine love enter our heart, and whether to open ourselves up to the power and love of God.

And in this we have an entirely new idea for a Lenten spiritual discipline. Not just giving up things; not just taking on things. But cultivating good qualities and opening ourselves up to the power of God, because only that can make us truly satisfied and content and enabling us to better love and serve God and each other.

So, let's go through that list Paul gives us in detail.

First: forbearance. What can we do to increase our patience, to cultivate self-control, tolerance, and restraint? The list of specific steps will be different for each of us, but the objective is the same: to become more merciful.

Next, purity. Now, we can't become more pure, we cannot restore innocence – but we can cultivate decency, transparency, and simple cleanliness.

Then there's knowledge. This may be more like a traditional Lenten discipline than many of the others, for we can increase our knowledge and love of for the divine by

meditating on God's holy Word. We can increase our knowledge of the church through reading. We can devote ourselves to learning more about who we are as Christian people.

After this comes kindness. This Lent, let us all seek to be more compassionate, more gentle, more considerate. It can be our aim to set aside all spite, viciousness, and harsh talk – no matter how people treat us.

Last among the virtues we can work on, is truthful speech. Honesty, candor, and integrity can be elusive. It is sometimes easier to tell a white lie than to maintain fidelity to truth. But if we take a few tentative steps in that direction, we will be better for it. And so will those around us – relationships to be whole must be based on honesty.

To become more merciful, more pure, more knowledgeable, more kind, more truthful – these cause us to behave more like God wants for us to follow Jesus more fully, more joyfully. And how can we do this?

That's where the second part of this discipline comes in: to allow ourselves to be led by the Holy Spirit, to let genuine love enter our heart, and to be open to the workings of God in and through us.

The only way any of this can work, the only means of making this a life-changing season, the only method for making permanent changes from destructive patterns of behavior is to seek divine assistance. And isn't that is what we are especially called to do in Lent. To acknowledge that we are not doing the best we can, to aspire to do better, and then to seek God's guidance and God's help in the lifelong process of becoming all that we can be.

In each one of us is a spark of divine goodness that compels us to persevere with great endurance through afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, and hunger.

We do this because we know at our core we are called to something better. As Christians, we are called to cultivate purity, knowledge, forbearance, kindness, and truthful speech. And this we do through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, in the force of genuine love, and by the power of God.

So, this Lent, may we all work on being reconciled to God; to renew our relationship with Jesus; may we work on our relationships with each other – love is really the only thing that matters, isn't it. May our Lenten journey set us off in a new direction – the direction of relating to others as Jesus did. Behold, now is the acceptable time. Amen.