

Gospel Reading: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Now, on Ash Wednesday, we do confront our mortality and we confess our sin before God, and we do it here, right here, because the church is where we come to know God's forgiveness and God's eternal hope. We are not creator. We are imperfect, dependent creatures, but we are creatures loved by God, not loved because of what we are, but loved in spite of the sinners that we are and because of what we can be through Jesus Christ. God is not indulgent. God is forgiving. There's a difference. God could have looked the other way, and defined no loving law nor boundaries, and let us loose to worship ourselves and to destroy each other with the desire to suck the whole world into our mouths. Instead, God came in Jesus Christ. Through Christ, we can have a relationship with God, and we see in Jesus a life lived according to God's will. How different Jesus' life was! How different Christians are called to be! As we respond to God's gift of grace offered in Christ, we are called to live higher and to live holier. In Christ we are free to be more than we are. We are free to love not only ourselves, but also our neighbors, and not only our neighbors, but also even our enemies. We certainly need God's help to do that! Forgiveness is ours not because we are perfect, but because we are loved, loved while we were yet sinners. Faith, faith involves turning toward the light and toward the love of God in Christ. Turning is the true definition of repentance, turning away from self and back toward God in the same way the prodigal son, who was walking away from his father, came to himself, and turned. That is a moment of repentance! If we put off repentance another day, someone has said, if we put off repentance another day, we have a day more to repent of, and one day less to repent in. We all die.

A pastor friend of mine wrote, "When I was serving a little church in rural Georgia, one of my member's relatives died, and my wife and I went to the funeral. They wheeled the coffin in, and the preacher began to shout and fume and flail his arms, "It's too late for Joe. He might have wanted to do this or that, but it's too late now. He's dead. He might have wanted to straighten his life out, but he can't now. It's over! It ain't too late for you. Why wait? Now, is the day for decision. Now, is the time to make your life count for something. Give your life to Jesus." My friend said, "That was the worst thing I've ever heard!" He said, "Can you imagine a preacher doing that in front of a grieving family." On the way home, to his wife, he couldn't get over it. He said, "I have never seen anything so manipulative, so cheap, so inappropriate. I would never preach a sermon like that." His wife paused a minute, nodded her head and agreed. She said, "Yes, it was tacky. Yes, it was manipulative. Yes, it was coarse. The worst part, the very worst part of it all is, it was true."

We have been baptized into Christ's death and resurrection. As Luther said, baptism takes only a few minutes, but it takes a lifetime to finish. Many Christians focus on spiritual discipline during Lent. We often hear the question, what have you given up during Lent? John Donahue asks instead, how can we give in to God trying to touch our lives? Can we during Lent especially be open to give in to God trying to touch our lives? We mostly have Teflon-coated souls. God does touch us, and God does want to change us, but too often we won't let it stick.

I like Frederick Beatner's questions for Lenten discipleship and Lenten discipline. He says this, and please, listen to these questions. He said, what last message would you give to a handful of people most dear to you? In 25 words or less, write it down. What last message would you give to the 25 people closest to you? He said, if the advice is important for them, live it out yourself. Number two, he said, which thing you have done would you most like to undo? To whatever degree you can, undo it now. Regret is self-indulgent. Regret is just self-indulgence. Repentance means undo if you can. Turn it around if you can. What person or cause would you die for? Live for it now. If this were the last day of your life, what would you do? Live that way every day. I know it's impossible to live a perfectly Christ-like life, but it is also impossible to be Christian and not try. You have to try. We fail, every one of us. We grow only with the help of God's spirit. Even though we fail, and even though God knows we sin, we are never too far gone to turn around to repent and to be embraced again. God waits with arms open for our return. Such a loving Father deserves praise. Praise Him in your life. Let others see His love and forgiveness in your life. You may appropriately mourn your sins and accept your mortality tonight on this service night, but we can laugh joyfully on Easter day at the absurdly amazing grace of God in Christ. Amen.