

**Ash Wednesday  
March 6, 2019**

**In the name of God, who in Jesus,  
taught us the meaning of unconditional Love.  
AMEN**

Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord your God, for God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.///// This from our first reading from the Book of Joel.

What can we say about God's love? / Well, we can certainly say that God's love is unconditional. God does not say, "I love you, if..." There are no ifs in the heart of God. God's love for us does not depend on what we say or what we do. On our looks or popularity or intelligence or success. God's love for us is from all eternity, forevermore and forevermore. It is not lost by any events or circumstances. Nor by any failures. Or even by turning our back on God.

Does that mean that God does not CARE what we do or say? // Of course not. Because to love without condition does not mean to love without concern. Rather it means never to take the love away. We are created in God's own image precisely in order for us to be in a loving relationship with God.

As we begin this Holy season of Lent, from this Ash Wednesday, from this evening forward, let us strive to enter more deeply into a truly loving relationship with God and indeed, with all of God's creation, without fear, without pretense, without hiding,..... trusting that we will receive love, love, and always more love; God's Love and God's Grace. You know, it is said that Grace is like Grits: It comes whether asked for or not.....because that is the nature of God. God is abounding in steadfast, constant love for you and for me, as close as our very breath.

When I think of Ash Wednesday and Lent, it seems that I always hear in my heart our beautiful prayer known as the Collect for Purity...where we say, "Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid." Because Lent is certainly intended as a time of reflection...Reflection, in honesty, before the Lord. And a time of an increased awareness and appreciation of the love of God for each of us....no matter what. Think of it: If God seems far away from you...who moved?

You may know that the word "Lent" comes from an old English word meaning "a lengthening". So as the days of springtime become longer, nature sings a song of renewed life, energy and growth. /// During Lent, we Christians are called upon to reflect together on the final weeks of the earthly ministry of Jesus and what difference that makes in our own lives. As we remember his ministry, his betrayal, his arrest and suffering on the cross, Lent gives us a time to stop in our tracks and seriously reflect on our own discipleship and where we are in all honesty in our Baptismal Covenant...in the things we agreed to...indeed...Covenanted to, with our Lord. Things like: "Whenever you fall into sin, that is, turn away from God, "will you repent and return to the Lord?"

The renowned 17<sup>th</sup> century English poet, George Herbert, was also a skilled amateur musician. He played in an orchestra of like-minded amateurs. Basically, they were all together because they just loved music. Well, one afternoon as George Herbert was on his way to meet with his friends for the music making, he encountered a man whose wagon had become stuck in a muddy ditch. George Herbert readily stopped to offer assistance. BUT, due to his good deed, the poet arrived at his friend's house quite a bit later than expected. One of the musicians there blurted out, "Looks like you've missed all the music." To which George Herbert responded, "Yes, but I will have songs at midnight." ////////// He had the satisfying fulfillment of doing the right thing...the Christ-like thing. His motivation in helping another was pure and loving. Surely, he did have songs at midnight.

Some of you know who I mean when I mention Peter Marshall. If so, you will remember that he was the preacher-man in the book "A Man Called Peter" ...a book, maybe from the '70's. Well, one time Peter Marshall said in a sermon, that "Faith is belief plus what you do with that belief." //// "Faith is belief PLUS what we do with that belief." //// Lent is a time for us to GROW in our gift of faith. Therefore, the church season of Lent is, I think, a season of hope. A time to face any hypocrisy we may have in being true Christ followers, genuinely striving to Love Jesus more dearly and follow him more nearly. Lent is a time to repent, a time to seek to be more honest before the Lord. Ash Wednesday, especially, calls us to look honestly at our life before the Lord////////and what do we see? //////////////////////////////////

Have we fallen short of our profession of faith through self- delusion or the temptation of pride? Have we loved things more than people? Has too much been about US and not about seeking and serving all others as we are expected to do, actually for our own soul's health? Where ARE we in relation to the Ash Wednesday message? Do we have hope? Do we feel strengthened as we examine our motives and as we renew our commitment to selfless service?

Jesus Christ is our compass on the Lenten road which begins today. With him as our guide, we pick up our crosses, whatever they may be, and follow him. Jesus is our guide, our role model, our friend, indeed ...our Lord over all of our lives. As we journey through Lent together, we are invited by God to let the life- giving message and challenges of Lent flood our souls and purify our beings. We have the invitation to be more honest and to truly examine our lives as Christians, held close in God's Love.

There is a wonderful story about a Mennonite farmer. He supplied cheese on consignment to the local convenience store. At the end of the year he was due \$6,000. But, the owner of the store couldn't pay him. He said he had fallen on tough times and in fact, it was worse than that. He told the farmer that he didn't know if he ever would be able to pay. He was so afraid that the farmer would sue him, or at least be angry at the storekeeper. But the farmer gently said, "Mennonites never sue." /// For him, piety and practice were the same. What he professed in faith and what he did in life were the same. He did not proclaim one thing and DO another.

When we take seriously our Ash Wednesday scriptures, we see that the bottom line is the constancy of our being loved and forgiven, and the love that we are called to manifest to a hurting world. In this Holy season of Lent we are called to intensify our relationship with God. Never to practice our religion in order to be noticed. And never to use prayer as a way to try to manipulate God for what we want, rather than to be in accord with what God knows we need. ////

Another wonderful poet, James Russell Lowell, put it like this:

"Give to the hungry - sweet charity's bread. / For giving is living", the angel said.

But, / from me, / the weary, wondering question came, "Must I be giving and giving again?" ///

"No", said the angel, piercing me through..."Just stop - when the Lord stops giving to you."////////

May this be the beginning of a powerful, Holy Lent for each of us.

AMEN