

**Ash Wednesday
February 26, 2020**

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

Sermon by The Rev. Deena M. Galantowicz

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 God's Love. God's love for us does not depend on what we say or what we do. On our 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 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.

Jesus Christ is our compass on our Lenten road. 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 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 with ourselves and to truly examine our lives as Christians, held close in God's Love. When we take seriously our Ash Wednesday scriptures, we see the constancy of *our* being loved and forgiven, **and** the love that *we* are called to manifest to a hurting world.

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 "from whom no secrets are hid." Because Lent is certainly intended as a time of reflection...Reflection in honesty before the Lord. The word "Lent" comes from an old English word meaning "a lengthening". So, as the days of springtime become longer, all of 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 our Lord's ministry and what difference that makes in our own lives. As we remember his betrayal, 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 with our Lord. Things like: "WHENEVER you fall into sin, that is, turn away from God, "will you repent and return to the Lord?"

Ash Wednesday calls us to look honestly at ourselves before the Lord ...and what do we see? Have we fallen short of our profession of faith - through self- delusion and pride? Have we loved things more than people? Ash Wednesday is a quiet time which offers us the opportunity to be very honestly reflective and then perhaps to want to strengthen our commitment to self/lessness wherever, and however we can.

Jesus Christ is our compass on our Lenten road. With him as our guide we pick up **our** crosses, whatever they may be, and follow him. He is our compass, our guide, our redeemer, our friend. As we journey through Lent together, we are invited to let the challenging message of Lent flood our souls and purify our beings. We have the invitation to be more honest with ourselves; are we surprisingly more SELF serving than even we realized? In this Holy season of Lent, I believe we have a new opportunity to intensify our relationship with God, to deepen our Covenant relationship. May this indeed be a very Holy Season for each of us.

I will end with a little vignette that I know I have shared before, but personally, I find it so helpful that I want to offer it again. A 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."

AMEN