

Sermon 2.10.16

Pastor Josh Ferris

Ash Wednesday, Year C

Psalm 51:1-18 | Isaiah 58:1-12 | Psalm 103:8-14 | Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

This morning I woke up early. I drove over to the SEPTA station in Wynnewood to meet another local pastor. We had decided to go there and offer prayer and ashes to people during the morning commute. I was a little nervous.

The first person I spoke to was a young man named Patrick. He didn't know anything about Ash Wednesday and so he asked what the ashes mean. I told him that in the Bible, ashes are a sign of *repentance* and turning back to God. On Ash Wednesday, I said, we acknowledge our own sinfulness, our own brokenness and need for God's grace and forgiveness. We remember our mortality – that God is God and we are *not*; we are finite, flawed human beings. He nodded thoughtfully and I gave him a little postcard full of information and he walked away.

And I thought to myself, “not too bad, Pastor.”

Over the next fifteen minutes I greeted everyone who was there, but no one asked for ashes. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that Patrick had come back and was standing close to us. Each time I looked, he was standing a little closer and a little closer, until he looked at me and shyly said, “I think I'd like some ashes.”

There was something that drew Patrick in. Almost immediately, four more people came up, asking for ashes. They were drawn in too. And apparently something has drawn you in, since here you are at worship tonight.

And if you think about it, that's kind of strange. It's strange that a day of *confession*, when we own up to the wrong and evil we've done; a day of *repentance*, when we do the hard

work of turning back to God; a day of *prayer*, when we admit that we're in need of a power greater than ourselves for forgiveness and wholeness; a day of *mortality*, when we remember that we're all going to die – it seems kind of strange that we're drawn to a day like today.

And yet here we are.

Ash Wednesday offers something very different from what we normally hear in our world. The Christian understanding of sin and mortality isn't *fashionable* in today's culture. Our understanding of sin opposes the idea that we're all amazing beings who can do no wrong and whose behaviors are above critique. Our faith denies that we have within ourselves all the power and skill needed to self-actualize, self-help, self-heal, and self-govern our lives. Ash Wednesday challenges the idea that morality is subjective. It flies in the face of a culture that is constantly trying to deny death through materialism, medicine, and pleasure. Today threatens the notion that if we just try really hard to be good people, that's all that matters.

Just recently a presidential candidate who identifies as a Christian said in an interview that they're a good, honorable person, and they're not sure that they've *ever* repented or asked God for forgiveness. They said, "I don't like to have to ask for forgiveness."

Who does?

And maybe this is all part of what makes Ash Wednesday so important.

Maybe this is what drew Patrick in at the train station.

Maybe it's why you're here tonight.

Because speaking the truth about our sin and our need and our mortality is freeing.

It's *freeing*, because it's the truth. Jesus once said to his disciples, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:32) We're speaking truth tonight in a world that lives in denial of the basic reality of our sin and humanity.

Denial is easier. It's easier to deny that we're sinful. To deny that we do wrong. It's easier to deny that we're not fully in control of our lives, that we're not all-powerful, that one day we will die. It's easier to deny that our actions are destroying this planet. To deny that racism exists in our country, and that the pale color of my skin brings privilege and opportunities that others don't receive. It's easier to deny things than to face them.

But denying the truth never leads to freedom.

Tonight we *are* speaking the truth, just like David did in our first reading, Psalm 51. Whether or not you've meant to, you've done things that are wrong. You've made bad decisions. You've been selfish and self-absorbed. At times you've turned away from God. You've done things and said things that have hurt people, people God created, and like a parent, this makes God hurt and angry. You've been part of taking this beautiful creation that God made from scratch – a homemade recipe – and filling it with trash, pollution, and destruction. We've turned a blind eye to the injustice around us, living instead in our comfortable bubbles. We haven't shared our bread with the hungry – in fact, we've built barriers so that we don't even have to see those who are hungry – and we haven't worked to free those who are oppressed even now. This, my brothers and sisters, is the sin that binds us. It deserves your attention, and it demands your repentance this Lent.

And though it seems counter-intuitive, embracing the fact that we are sinful, and confessing our sins, it brings freedom.

Our reading from Psalm 103 tells us that there is a *deeper* reality, one that we can only experience when we confess and embrace the truth of our own sin and need and brokenness. And that is the reality of God's love and forgiveness.

What *truly* matters tonight is not the ashes I will rub on your forehead, but the fact that they will be traced in the shape of a cross. The cross of Jesus speaks louder than any sin, any evil, any grave, *anything* that may seek to claim you. It is a declaration that God "does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love...as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us." (Psalm 103:10-12) Through the cross, God's grace and mercy have come to you.

We can only experience this grace and mercy when we embrace our need for it. When we confess, admit that we have sinned, and need forgiveness. When we confess we've done wrong, and need to be cleansed. When we concede that we are broken in a way that we cannot fix ourselves. When we recognize that we are mortal and can't do a thing about it. In the confessing and truth, as scary as they may be, we experience forgiveness and healing in Jesus.

And we are set free.

Free from our burdens and baggage. Free to love ourselves as we are. Free to repent from that which separates us from God and one another. Free to trust and rely on the God who created us out of dust. Free to truly live. May you be drawn in. Amen.