

This past Wednesday, on Ash Wednesday we started our 40-day Lenten journey. This season of Lent is all about letting go of the things that hold us back from fully surrendering our lives to God. It is a time of fasting, prayer, and repentance.

During the Ash Wednesday service, we took a moment in corporate repentance. We read Psalm 51 responsively, we buried the word “Alleluia” as a way for us all to give up something together. This is the very first word we utter on Easter Sunday so not saying it for these 40 days will make it ever more sweeter on that day. Each time we want to say it we are called to remember Christ’s sacrifice for us on the cross. And finally, we received ashes to mark us as sinners in need of God’s redeeming grace.

We also took a moment to write down something that had been holding us back in our relationship with God and placed it in a box. These notes will be burned on Good Friday as we remember that Christ takes on all our sin and all our brokenness on the cross. I did not read the notes people put in this box, but if I had to guess I think one of the hardest things for all of us to do is to offer forgiveness to other people and ourselves.

These are the types of things we hold onto the most...the moments where people have hurt us and we are not ready to forgive them. We may write down their name each year as something we know we need to offer to God, and yet on the day after Easter we pick up their names again, being unable to forgive them.

We all have these experiences in our lives where people hurt us. For me, I had a difficult relationship with my grandfather. All three of my other grandparents had passed away by the time I was 12 and he was on the only one left, and yet he did not strive to be an active part of me or my sister’s life.

He was not a pleasant person and had abandoned my mom and her sibling when she was young. So, I certainly carried some resentment towards him.

When I was serving at my first church he passed away. I thought after he died, I would no longer have these feelings, but even after he passed away I was unable to forgive him.

It was not until two years later during Lent that I was finally able to surrender my resentment of him at the cross at a Good Friday Service.

In our humanity we are imperfect, we fail. We hurt others accidentally when we are trying to do all the other things that life requires. We all know the feeling of betrayal and hurt and we all may still be feeling these feelings of betrayal and hurt even years later. This is not the life that Christ is calling us to lead.

As we venture with Christ from the wilderness to the cross this season of Lent, we will hear the seven phrases that Christ said while hanging on the cross for our sins.

While we hear these phrases from Scripture, we have to remember that Jesus went to great effort to share them with us, as it was very painful to be crucified and took much effort to speak.¹ This is why these words are so important because in them we find that Jesus, even from the cross, was offering us the love and grace of God.

Our Scripture for today is three simple words from Luke 23, it reads: “Father, forgive them.” Now these words have some backstory in the Gospel of Luke. Scripture in Luke 22 tells us that “Satan entered Judas” and Judas gave Jesus over to the chief priests (Luke 22:3).

Jesus knew about this, as he gave the last supper and yet he went through the whole meal without denying them anything. Afterwards he said, “My betrayer is with me” (Luke 22:21).

Jesus knew what was about to happen at his crucifixion. He already knew he was betrayed and knew he would be denied by his disciples. Yet he called them to prayer.

They couldn't even stay awake, but Jesus realizing the gravity of his next step asked God to “take this cup from [him]” then relented to the will of God saying “not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42).

Then Jesus was arrested and sent before Pilate who let the people decide who should be crucified, Barabbas, a known criminal or Jesus “King of the Jews” (Luke 23: 13-25). Three times the crowd called for Jesus and not Barabbas to be crucified, they kept shouting “Crucify him!”

So Jesus was hung on the cross with two other criminals and the first words he uttered on the cross were “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:35). In his book “Final Words from the Cross” Pastor Adam Hamilton explores who the “them” is in this statement from Christ. When Jesus said, “Father, forgive them” who was he referring to. Hamilton argues that the “them” includes the guards that tortured Jesus, it includes the crowd that shouted, “Crucify him!” it includes the disciples who denied and betrayed Christ, and the “them” also includes us.

When Jesus made that statement on the cross, he was not just offering forgiveness to those present in the moment, he was offering forgiveness to everyone from that moment on who sinned against God.ⁱⁱ Hamilton says, “This act was for those who had come before and for those who would come after Jesus as much as it was for those who heard his words that day.”ⁱⁱⁱ

During this season of Lent, we must admit that it was also our sin that led Jesus to the cross. That we see ourselves in Judas, someone trying to please God, but lured by the things of this world.

That we see ourselves in the Pharisees, those who long to practice their faith, but get caught up in the action of practicing and are not able to as Joel 2 calls us to, “rend [our] hearts to God.”

We see ourselves in the disciples who were too tired to pray. We see ourselves in Peter, as we quickly wipe the ashes of Ash Wednesday from our heads and struggle to practice our faith at all times and all places. We have to see ourselves for what we are...sinners, but Lent is not just about drowning in our sin. It is about acknowledging that we are sinners, and then taking that extra step to turn away from sin.

Also in the same statement in which we realize that we are the “them” that we are identified as sinners, we also have to claim that we are the “them” that Christ was offering forgiveness to.

This is the good news for our lives today: that Christ continues to offer us forgiveness even though we are imperfect, even though we do things that continue to hurt other people and God.

That is what God’s grace is all about, it is a free and unmerited offering of love from God. It is our responsibility to accept this grace. We do this when we repent and ask for God’s forgiveness for the sins we have committed. We do this when we truly forgive people who have wronged us. It does not mean we forget, but we have to let go of the feelings of bitterness and hatred against the other person so like Psalm 51 God can “create within [us] a clean heart.”

Lent is a wonderful time to reprioritize our lives. It is time to stop in the business of life and contemplate God’s will for our lives. Just as Jesus Christ surrendered his life to the will of God, we are called to do the same.

Unlike Advent the season of preparation, Lent is a season of surrender. During these 40 days we die to ourselves over and over and over again.

As a Christian, surrender is the action that we do not only do one time, we have to be intentional about this action.

We surrender and then we repent. We ask for God’s forgiveness, and then we turn away from the sin that was holding us back. True repentance is not saying we are sorry and then doing the same thing over and over again. True repentance is telling God we are sorry and then stopping the behavior. This is how we turn away from ourselves and turn towards God.

Like burying the “Alleluia” what are the behaviors in your life that you need to bury, never to be seen again? Who are the people in your life who can be there for you as you do these things?

Then in the place of these things that you have surrendered to God, what are the things that you can add back into your life that are life giving? What are the things you can add back into your life that make you feel whole and like you are living out God’s will for your life?

I hope you will join me in daily prayer, as we all continue to discern God’s will for our lives. Don’t be afraid to spend some time in serious reflection of the things God is asking you to do with your life.

Just as Simon of Cyrene carried the cross for Jesus Christ, God may be calling you to take on a new spiritual discipline for the glory God.

Today may we all be thankful that we serve a God who continues to offer us forgiveness today and always. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ Adam Hamilton. “Final Words from the Cross” Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2011. P. 16.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, P. 18-19.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, P. 19-20.

Additional Resources

Keck et al. “The New Interpreter’s Biblical Commentary.” Vol. VIII. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 1995. P. 450-463.