

Rev. Lynne Ogren Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
February 14, 2018 Ash Wednesday
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

This week we have been watching the Olympics. I am always amazed at the discipline of the Olympic athletes, the dedication they have to develop their strength and skill. I imagine, and I hope, that most of these athletes find joy in their sport and in the training it takes to get to this kind of competitive level. But for all of them, the ultimate purpose is to win a prize that is recognized by others.

We all have personal disciplines of one sort or another. Maybe like the Olympic athletes you know what it's like to work toward a goal, whether it's a physical, athletic goal to climb a mountain or hike a long trail or working through intense physical therapy after an injury. Or maybe you know what it's like to achieve something like an academic degree which requires a different set of disciplines.

But even in our everyday lives we create habits which require discipline to maintain. We make choices about what we eat and how we exercise. We pay our bills and shovel our driveways and sidewalks. We might make a weekly phone call to a distant parent or relative. Even charging our cell phones is an act of discipline.

Do we have these disciplines to win a prize or so that we'll be recognized by others? Mostly, our lives just go better when we do them! Our bodies work better when we are healthy and fit. And we keep the heat and the lights turned on when we pay our bills.

Our relationships are also better. Our neighbors appreciate when we keep up with our section of the sidewalks in clearing the snow. We maintain good relationships with our families when we stay in touch.

Some disciplines are easier to keep than others. We know we are drawn to serve ourselves.

We eat what gives us satisfaction for the moment, even when it will lead to discomfort in one form or another later.

We decide it's too cold, or I have to go to work early, or I have a little headache, so we choose not to exercise that day.

We lose patience with our loved ones so we don't want to make that call and listen to the same complaints or stories or questions again.

And no one would be crazy enough to walk outside in temperatures like this so who will care if I don't shovel?

Today we are called to return to God, to take up the disciplines that are good and healthy for our spiritual lives—prayer, fasting, and giving to those in need.

It would be easy to tell ourselves that we don't have time for spiritual disciplines. I'm too busy with my personal disciplines of work and family and other commitments to spend time in prayer.

In this season of Lent we would rather indulge in that which satisfies our own desires and comfort than do without. We think we don't have enough resources for ourselves so we cannot spare a dollar or an hour or any of our material goods for someone who needs them even more desperately than we do.

We are being called to return to God. Today we remember that it is God who made us from the dust of the earth. God is the source of our very being. Just as we invest in our family and friendships, God wants to be in relationship with us. And relationships are a two way street.

We are called to return to God. We remember that it is God who provides for our every need. Our gospel reading tonight skipped a portion of Matthew, chapter 6, the part where Jesus teaches us to pray. In the Lord's Prayer we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." Martin Luther reminds us that it is God who gives us not only bread but all that we need for this earthly life.

We remember that even when our tendency is to serve ourselves, when we turn our hearts again to God, that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. God wants to bless us rather than punish us.

Spiritual disciplines like prayer, fasting, and giving turn our hearts again to God's love, faithfulness, and generosity for us.

Spiritual disciplines also turn our hearts toward our neighbors—to see their need, to recognize God's mercy in our lives, and then to realize that God has given us something to offer to the world.

This return to God begins with confession. Professor Rolph Jacobson of Luther Seminary says this about confession:

"It is a vital spiritual practice to know how to confess your sins. And it is a vital spiritual practice to know how to receive forgiveness, and then trust in that forgiveness and not continue to be plagued by your own guilt or brokenness."

When we truly receive God's forgiveness, God's steadfast love enters into our hearts turning us away from our need for self-preservation, our desire to be better than others, our fear of not being accepted or loved—all of which separate us from God and our neighbor. When we truly receive God's forgiveness, God's steadfast love creates in us new hearts that look to God for our every need and look to our neighbor for ways we can serve.

In the coming weeks we will hear some of the key stories of the Old Testament. On Sundays we will hear the stories of God's covenant with Creation and God's people, a covenant God renewed over and over again.

On Wednesdays we will recall the salvation stories in which Creation and God's people are saved by God's steadfast love and mercy, stories in which God brings light out of darkness, and life out of death.

Those stories are our stories, too. God wants to save us and not punish us. God wants to forgive us and renew our hearts. Let us return to God with all our hearts as we commend ourselves in every way as God's servants and beloved children.

Thanks be to God for his steadfast love and mercy. Amen