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February 17, 2021

Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
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

When I was a kid, my mother and I struggled in our relationship. Compared to my two brothers I was the one who did the majority of complaining and pushing the limits of curfews and other boundaries. Whenever I thought one of my missteps had been really no big deal, Mom would blow up. But when I came to her with genuine remorse and begging for forgiveness, that's when she was most compassionate. It took a long time for me to realize that my attitude toward my behavior directly impacted my mother's reaction.

Good parents, like my mom, give us just a glimpse of what our relationship with God is like. Like any good parent, God wants what is best for us. The boundaries God sets are for our good and protection. But we still rebel against those boundaries time and again. We long for God's approval, even as we seek the approval of our peers and the larger society whose opinions are often at odds with what God intends for us. Ash Wednesday is a day for us to get real about ourselves, and to hear the call to return again to God.

I would love to know what draws you here to worship on this strange and very different day. It's not a Sunday, so it took some effort to show up, whether here or at home. On Sundays we often come to be inspired and renewed in faith. Ash Wednesday gives us a chance to pause and acknowledge how much we fall short in our faith in God, to recognize again that we are mortal and not God, to come to confess that truth and receive forgiveness for thinking we have more power than we do. Many people don't want to look that deeply into their own hearts.

Maybe we are afraid of what we will see, or afraid that even when we recognize our failings that we will never be able to live up to God's expectations, so why bother even trying? But I don't think God is as hung up on the details as we are. God simply wants us to return, to come home, even if we have broken our curfew.

The prophet Joel declares the mantra of the Hebrew Scriptures, that describes the Lord as "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." God draws us back not through threats of punishment, but by reminding us of the kind of God we have, one who longs to be in a loving and faithful relationship with us. Like a teenager who goes home, even after a night of partying or carousing, we know we can go home to God because God will always love us and is more concerned for our welfare than our petty offenses.

Author Anne Lamottⁱ wrote about a dark time in her life when she was addicted to drugs and alcohol, she'd had an affair that led to an abortion, and then she watched her friend die of cancer. During that time, she would go to a church once in a while, sit in the back, and leave before the sermon. She was there for the music, she said.

In her darkest hour, Anne wrote about a night when she sensed the presence of someone sitting on the floor in the corner of her room, suspecting it was Jesus. When she opened her eyes, she couldn't see him, but she knew he was there. After she slept and woke up, he was no longer with her but in the days that followed, she felt like a little cat was following her everywhere she went. She writes: "But I knew what would happen: you let a cat in one time, give it a little milk, and then it stays forever..."

Eventually Anne went back to that church, and this time she stayed through the sermon. But it was the last song that surrounded and filled her with love and acceptance. It was the voices of the congregation, not of the preacher, that broke open her heart. She ran from the church in tears and when she got home she said to God, “I quit. You can come in.”

That’s what this day is about. It’s about quitting our fight to prove to ourselves that we are good enough or worthy of love. It’s about giving up our struggle to fill our empty places with the many things we think will either numb our pain or replace it—whether that’s booze or drugs, spending money that we don’t have or spending what we do have on things that are meaningless, overworking, overeating, or simply escaping by whatever means seem easiest.

It’s not that those things cause us to turn from God, it’s because we have turned from God that we turn to those things. Today we are reminded again that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. God pursues us patiently, inviting us to turn toward a life where we are surrounded by love, grace, hope, and the promise that we will never be left alone.

The practices outlined in the reading from Matthew’s gospel can seem like add-ons to the Ten Commandments, ways of measuring our worthiness in God’s eyes. Instead, we can see them as gifts we have given by God to help us turn our hearts toward God’s goodness again.

Giving alms or offering ourselves in some way to the needs of others may be our first step toward returning to God. When we pay attention to the world God so loves, and then contribute something we have been given—time, skills, or maybe money—we start to take on the love and grace of God within ourselves.

When we pray, whether for ourselves or for others, we open our hearts for God to make a home in us. In the verses that were skipped in this reading, Jesus teaches us to pray what we have come to call The Lord’s Prayer, a prayer that turns our hearts toward God’s kingdom and will—for us and for all whom God loves.

Perhaps the most difficult practice is fasting, or giving up the things that keep us from relying on God—not to impress God or others or even ourselves. When we recognize that some habit or power in our life is blocking our view of God’s intended good purposes for us, learning to live without that thing—or even less of it—helps us trust in God’s grace and not on our own power.

Over the coming weeks of Lent we will hear story after story of God renewing the covenant God makes with the world, with all humanity and creation itself. From the very beginning, God has always moved toward us, even to the point of coming into the world in the person of Jesus Christ who brought God’s steadfast love and faithfulness to us in the life he lived and in giving his life to death on a cross. By Christ’s resurrection, we receive the gift of life that frees us from all that would keep us from God.

We are free to return to God. Like a parent waiting for her child to come home late at night, it is never too late to return to the care and protection of God’s loving embrace. May this Ash Wednesday be a time to quit running away, and return to God’s steadfast love.

Thanks be to God. Amen

ⁱ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Pantheon, 1999), 49-50