

Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2021

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

I would find preaching on this Ash Wednesday about repentance and penitence and fasting easier, if there weren't so many people dying right now, so many cases of COVID-19 and its variants, so many people unemployed, so many businesses closing, so many suffering anxiety, stress, and depression, so many losing the strength to bear up under the loneliness of not seeing family, friends, and our sisters and brothers in Christ, so many worried about getting vaccinated in a timely manner.

So, what are you giving up for Lent this year? Doesn't this question sound rather cynical and cruel at this particular time? How can we talk about giving things up when so many of us have made so many sacrifices, large or small, in these last eleven months. Having to hold this service online rather than gathering in person for worship is already an instance of what we have had to give up in these past months. So many of the people I talk with have had moments when life seems overwhelming, if not unbearable, when God seems to be incredibly far away.

So “what are you giving up for Lent” seems to trivialize the difficult and sometimes painful experiences the people in our congregations and the people we know may have had. So what are we to do? Is there an alternative? Indeed, there is. “Whenever you pray,” Jesus encourages us. Unfortunately the lectionary reading for Ash Wednesday only includes the “How Not To Pray” section on prayer and omits the “How To Pray” section--the Lord's Prayer.

This Lenten season I would exhort you not to give up on prayer, but pray, reflect on, and enact the Lord's Prayer for these forty days. Jesus giving us this prayer is an act of pure grace, especially for those who suffer from prayer anxiety--“I don't know what to say” or “I'm not sure I'm praying the right way.” Jesus not only releases our

hearts from false worries and fears about what prayer is; he puts on our lips the prayers to pray. "But the Christian's prayer is easy, and it does not cause hard work It presents its need from the heart." (Luther)

This sermon is not a full blown commentary on the Lord's Prayer. I encourage you to make it your discipline this Lenten season. But I do want to comment on the sixth and seventh petitions which are particularly apt for Lent: "And lead us not *into* temptation, but rescue us from evil." This prayer for God's leading is another way of praying that God's gracious governance and rule, God's Kingdom, and God's loving and redeeming will guide us in our present circumstances and into the future.

A contemporary picture of this petition is of a people walking through something like a minefield peppered with boobytraps. We pray that we will not be led *into* a minefield of overwhelming temptation. To come *into* something is to enter its sphere of influence and so come under its dominion. Walking in and through these temptations we pray amid these temptations that we may not fall into them, or set off any of them. Temptation confronts us every day, particularly in challenging times such as these. It is illusory and delusory to think it does not exist. We pray that temptation does not attract us, entrap us, or overpower us.

Temptations are constantly luring us toward this minefield and pitfalls and we recognize that only God's powerful rescuing, snatching, seizing us can free us from our self-destruction and our harming others and all creation. What is this evil? Matthew's Gospel succinctly characterizes evil as the lawlessness of lovelessness. *Temptation* is the situation, the place, the minefield *into* which we wander; *evil* is the power – the lawlessness of lovelessness-- whose influence draws us *into* the minefield, entraps us and dominates us in it.

Do not fall into the temptation of thinking you are spiritual warriors and spiritual giants and pray, "Bring on temptation! I can handle it!" We do not go looking for ordeals or tests, but humbly pray for God's

protection and guidance. The focus in Lent is that Christ would lead us in such a way that we will be able to avoid and to resist the temptations that constantly surround us, and rescue us from the lawlessness of lovelessness, the evil, which threatens to overpower us and dominate our lives.

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The Lord's Prayer stretches from the holiness of God's name to the evil which can make existence a living hell. This prayer in its seven petitions embraces everything of importance in life. It begins with messages of grace and mercy and concludes with urgent warnings about the evils which threaten our lives.

These petitions, any and every prayer for that matter, are not simply sentences set adrift like messages in a bottle cast into the sea, nor spam emails launched into cyberspace. They are a mainstay of an active and full relationship with God. Praying is not merely standing, sitting, or kneeling with your hands folded, head bowed, and eyes closed. Prayer is our whole life – our thinking, our willing, our doing, our very being – offered to God.

The Ash Wednesday Gospel reading tells us “how not to pray,” what constitutes a shameful prayer life. Our Lenten exhortation is for a shameless prayer life. Pray shamelessly! Our prayers to God ought to be bold, audacious, unfailingly confident. This means we do not just sit back and nonchalantly and apathetically wait for God to possibly answer.

The Spirit is at work in prayer such that prayer is an address to God and God's address to us. In prayer the Spirit not only gets God moving, but the Spirit gets us moving, it gets us working, to actually start living into the reality we have prayed for. So while we pray for those who are lonely, we also contact those who may be lonely by phone, email, facebook, twitter, Zoom, a card or a letter. While we pray for the homeless or hungry, we also contribute to the food bank or donate clothing or other articles to those organizations which help

those in need. While we pray for peace, justice, and compassion, we also make financial contributions to those organizations which carry out these God-pleasing ministries. As we live into the present and into the future for which we pray, that God's Kingdom come, God's will be done, all be fed with daily bread, and that forgiveness, not conflict and strife, be our way of life, we are in fact praying shamelessly.

In this particular season of Lent there are so many individuals, dear people of faith, who need our prayers. Prayers understood as words, as actions, and as our very lives. People who are dying or ill need

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our prayers of comfort and healing. People who are lonely, anxious, depressed need our prayers of welcome, friendship, encouragement, and hope. People who are unemployed, people whose livelihoods are threatened, who are hungry or homeless need our prayers of support. People who are excluded, marginalized, neglected, powerless need our prayers of invitation, dignity, and justice.

This Lent pray shamelessly, trusting God will give us the Holy Spirit not only to speak, but to live, our prayers.

Amen.