

ASH WEDNESDAY, YEAR A

22 February 2023

Almighty and everlasting God, you despise nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent. Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our brokenness, may obtain of you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Collect for Ash Wednesday

The Collect for Ash Wednesday, that we entered into worship by praying together this morning, is one of my favorites in church year. It offers an important reminder that God despises nothing that he has made, particularly as we begin this season of penitence, reflecting on our own weaknesses and shortcomings. It sometimes happens that when we feel like we have done wrong, when we have sinned, our guilt makes us feel as though God would not care to be near us. This is not so, and this Collect reminds us that we are not shunned; we are beloved children of God.

The prayer continues, "Create and make in us new and contrite hearts," words from Psalm 51. Psalm 51 was authored by King David at a time in his life when his wrongdoing had cause great suffering. David wrote this psalm after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba while her husband, Uriah, was away at war. Bathsheba conceived a child by their affair. In an effort to cover this up, David sent Uriah to fight on the frontlines in battle, where he is killed. David had done this intentionally, so that Uriah would die, thereby concealing his own wrongdoing. In this terrible situation, not only does Uriah die, but the child dies as well. In his state of grief and brokenness, David comes before the Lord and prays the words of Psalm 51, which we too will pray, together, very shortly after this homily.

Now in preparation for Ash Wednesday, I've been thinking about our responses or reaction to our own sin being exposed; the realization that we have done wrong. I was thinking about how children are a great illustration of our own, 'grown-up' reactions to sin. From lived experience as a parent and minister to children, I came up with three common responses to sin:

Denial – have you ever known a child to get caught in doing something wrong, but they flat-out deny their activity? For one of my children, this is their go-to way of dealing with their own wrongdoings. I'll say, "Did you do this?" and my son says, "No, no. I did not do that," (of course, his words are often more convincing than his face, which gives away the fact that, yes, he has done something wrong!). This response can be frustrating for me as a parent, because what I'm trying to offer him in that moment is not condemnation for having done wrong, but a way forward. I can't always change the trajectory of my children's actions; we make choices and there are consequences for these choices. But I would like to offer him a hope beyond the shame and guilt of having failed.

False Piety - Now, another reaction to wrongdoing that I've noticed in children is what I'm titling 'false piety'. What does this look like? The best example that I could think of what an interaction that I had with a girl in a kid's church program. I caught her with a pile of clothes that had clearly been shoplifted; the garments still had security tags attached. So, I said to her, "You know that this is wrong. You cannot do this again." Frustratingly, her response to me was, "Yes, I know, I know. It's really bad. It's very wrong. I won't do it again," and I said, "Yes, because you could get in serious trouble. Not only is it

wrong to steal, but you're risking your future. You could get a criminal record if you continue to shoplift," to which she says, "I know it's definitely wrong. I could definitely get a criminal record. I won't do it again. You're right," She didn't mean a word of this. Her response was as unhelpful as a posture of denial. She said all the right words, feigned remorse, only to stop me from nagging her any further. So again, I didn't feel as though there was space for me to offer her a way forward, a way past the wrongdoing.

Fleeing - Now, the third reaction to sin, or wrongdoing, that I've been reflecting on is fleeing. This is frequently demonstrated by another one of my children; he's a runner. If you say to him, "Who did this?!" he's off running and tries to hide. Often his hiding spots are not very good ones, which reminds me of another psalm of David: "Where can I go from your spirit, or where can I flee from your presence? (Psalm 139:7). Of course, the answer is nowhere; but God will not force us to do his will. Neither can I force my child to speak to me about their wrongdoing. This is acutely apparent when we flee; if someone's running from you, you can't talk about what's gone wrong and again, offer a way forward.

This same son of mine, while he runs about half of the time, the other half of the time, he just breaks. He weeps; his head hangs low. Tears are the response to his sin. And while this might make me sound like a bad mother, I'm actually delighted when this is his response, because his acknowledgement of having done wrong allows for me help him move past it. He has made space for a way forward.

The same is true of what we are doing this morning. When we come before God, in a posture of penitence, confessing our wrongdoings, God does not delight in our upset. The endgame is not our condemnation. God is delighted by our bowing before him this morning, in acknowledgment of our sins, because he offers us a way forward. All we need to do is accept; to allow him to move us past that which weighs us down and the sin that entangles us.

This is exactly what he does for King David. David comes broken before the Lord, offering his prayer, and while this doesn't undo the consequences of his actions, God offers him hope, a way forward. There is restored communion between the Lord and David, whose name means 'beloved'. David remains beloved of the Lord. And through David, God keeps His promise of bringing forth a Messiah, the King of Kings, who is also called 'Beloved' by the Father (cf. Matthew 3:17). And it is in Christ that we are found to be God's beloved; precious children in His sight.

May we enter this season knowing that God does not despise us; we are his beloved. He cares for us too much to leave us suffering in sin. Let each of us accept the hope that the Lord offers; a way forward with him who would lay down his life in love for us.

Amen.