

Ash Wednesday
Matthew 6:1-6,16-21
February 14, 2018
The Rev. Bonnie Underwood

Who We Are and Whose We Are

As strange as it may sound, Happy Valentine's Day!

I realize that's not why we're gathered here today, but since Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day don't share a date very often, it seems like this date-alignment should at least be mentioned. Even our bishop, Bishop Wright mentioned in this week's *For Faith* article, that "both days are about the heart. Valentine's Day gives us an occasion to show our heart to others. And Ash Wednesday inaugurates a season to examine our hearts."

And that's why we're here today, gathered together on Ash Wednesday: to begin the penitential season of Lent. The early Church set aside this time as preparation for baptism, for reconciliation, and a reminder for all God's people of our continual need for repentance and renewal. So too in our own time, Lent is a season when we're encouraged to pause, to slow down, and take the time to ask God, in God's great mercy, to help us see into our own hearts and come to know the truth of who we are and whose we are, helping us to recognize our own need for repentance and renewal as we strive to grow more fully into living our faith.

The world around us doesn't seem to allow us to slow down, much less take the time to reflect on who we are, whether as individuals or as a community. We're asked to keep up with it all: with juggling our overflowing and sometimes overwhelming schedules; to be perfect in all that we do; to run that tightrope as we attempt to balance needs of family, relationships, and work. And all that is within a society that seems driven to divisiveness and fear that pushes us towards a mindset of scarcity, causing many to believe that much of life is a zero-sum game, where the only way for me to win is for someone else to lose . . . with its accompanying inability to find common ground and have civil discourse in our public lives.

We're all bound — imprisoned — within these false expectations. And this bondage is sin. It's not easy to talk about sin unless we're talking about someone else's morality or lack of it. But all things that separate us from God, from loving God and loving our neighbors are, by definition, sin. And neither we nor our systems and structures can free ourselves from sin on our own. We don't have that power.

Instead, what we do have is the ability to intentionally pause, opening ourselves to listening to God and asking God to help us see the truth of who we are. And for us here today, we'll take that first step together, as we are reminded of that truth, in a stark, tangible, and meaningful way, when we accept the imposition of ashes.

We are all fragile, mortal beings, walking this earth for only a moment in time. All those things that can relentlessly drive us, can consume us daily — our stuff, our activities, how others see us, look up to us, admire us, or not — all those things are temporary, ethereal, gone in an instant, for we are like the grasses of the field that are here today and gone tomorrow. The

ashes remind us of our humanness, our sinfulness — that we are but dust and to dust we shall return.

Yet we are beloved dust. Formed of the earth, made in God's own image, filled with breath, the Spirit of God, and through God's grace, freely given the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ.

And this is another important truth: for we are God's own and we are beloved. God sees us, knows us, and welcomes us — in love — into deep and intimate relationship. With complete knowledge of all our failures, our sinfulness, our human inability to do what we want to do and not do what we don't want to do . . . in spite of all that . . . God remains steadfast and constant, loving us fully and eternally. God loves us so much that he sent his own Son to show us, to teach us about God's infinite, saving love.

And what does God ask of us? To love. To grow into the truth of who we are and whose we are by loving one another. God asks us to follow our Lord and Savior and love like Jesus, and Jesus has shown us the way. When we live into acts of mercy and kindness, when we pray, or fast, it should not be to show others how pious and righteous we are, not to achieve rewards and accolades, but to do these things for God alone. Love is what to strive for: for where our treasure is, there our hearts will be also.

I invite you during this Lent to strike out on a journey of reflection and discovery to determine what it may mean for you to love like Jesus. That may mean taking the time to pray for the people you struggle with — the difficult, the argumentative, the irreconcilable — and asking for Jesus' help to open your heart to seeing them as God sees them.

It may mean fasting from some activity, rather than food, that could open up the time for the Spirit to move within you, guiding you toward new acts of compassionate caring.

Or perhaps your journey of discovery will involve you seeking God's help to shine the light on the fears that drive you, those dark corners you've been unwilling for anyone else to know about, and offering them up to God.

But do strive to spend time with God. Strive to observe a Holy Lent, through self-examination, repentance, and prayer; spending time with the Word; all while asking God to help you discover how you are called to love like Jesus.

For God knows the truth of who we are — in all our broken beauty — and welcomes us, because of whose we are, God's own beloved. What wonders could happen, for us and the world, if we could intentionally open ourselves to discovering the nudgings of the Spirit, as she points us towards new possibilities of healing and reconciliation, as we strive to love like Jesus? Amen.