

“The Potato Salad Promise”

Date: March 6, 2019

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Joel 2; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Occasion: Ash Wednesday

Themes: Ash Wednesday, mortality, repentance, turning

Tony Campolo tells the story about a church where once a year it celebrates student recognition day. One year, after several students had spoken quite eloquently, the pastor started his sermon in a striking way. He said, “Young people, you may not think you’re going to die, but you are. One of these days they’ll take you to the cemetery, put you in a hole in the ground, and throw some dirt on top of you. And then everyone goes back to the church to eat potato salad.”

What a slap in the face; what a wake-up call. We may not like to acknowledge it, but someday each one of us will have to face the “potato salad promise.” Which is simply to say, one day we will all die. “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, we all return to the Lord.” “Ring around the rosy, pockets full of posies; ashes, ashes we all fall down.”

It is with this grim reminder that we shall all die one day that we gather tonight to prepare for our death – by getting right with God. The time to reconcile with God is not when the semi-truck is about to slam into your windshield, or whenever death comes unexpectedly. The time to prepare for eternity is now. No one knows the day or the hour of their death.

And so we should get our affairs in order, tonight. I’m not talking about your legal affairs – that’s important and if you want to know more about that you can attend our seminar luncheon this Sunday after second service where the Health Ministries will talk about the Five Wishes.

I’m not referring to who your power of attorney is, or that sort of thing; I’m talking about your soul, and your relationship with God. We are not

simply a bag of bones filled with water, which is dropped into the ground when we're finished using it.

We are creatures of God with an eternal soul – souls that can spend eternity *with* God or *separated from* God. He made us to have eternal life – life forever – with or without Him. So what is it that could separate us from God forever? It's called sin.

Sin separates us from God. Sin destroyed that beautiful relationship which Adam and Even had with God. Sin can separate us from God, eternally if we don't deal with it. The Bible tells us the wages of sin is death – eternal death; spiritual death. What is life without God but death?

And so we come to this year's Ash Wednesday service. This service is ancient in its practice. It goes back to ancient times when the season of Lent served as a time for public sinners who wanted to get right with God, to be guided through the process of reconciliation. Christians who had backslidden would repent of their sin and seek to walk in the way of Christ once more.

It was at the same time, a period of preparation for persons who wanted to be baptized and to join the Church. It was a time of study and preparation, as well as a time of repentance – becoming aware of one's sin and preparing to leave the life of sin behind. They were beginning a new life – the way of Jesus.

Imagine you're traveling down the highway and you miss your exit. You've been talking to friends or family in your car and the next time you look up at the exit sign you realize you're ten or twenty miles past the exit you wanted. What would you do?

Of course, the answer is you would turn around. If you're going the wrong way, if you're headed in the wrong direction, the only way you'll

reach your destination is to turn around. That's what the prophet Joel tells the people of Israel to do in our OT reading for tonight. "Return to the LORD, your God," he says. Joel is not talking about traveling down the highway. But he is using a Hebrew word that's commonly found in the OT to speak about repentance. It's a word that literally means "to turn around."

You belong with God, but you've been moving away from Him, putting other things ahead of God. The only way to get back to where you belong is to turn around. But how, how do you do that? When you're driving your car, you might make a U-turn, or you get off the highway and get back on, headed in the opposite direction.

Spiritually, our turning looks different. The various spiritual practices we talk about during Lent are practices which place us in a new position to receive God's grace. *Sin* separates us from God, and it is only the saving grace of Jesus Christ that re-unites us with God. The spiritual disciplines are means of grace.

The things we do are not meant to convince God He should love us again. God already loves us. The spiritual disciplines we practice during Lent are simply things we do to confess that we are not all that we should be, and they place us in a position so that the Holy Spirit can re-orient us.

What kinds of things am I talking about? Things like prayer, fasting, sharing with the poor, confession, meditation. When we do these things we are not trying to make ourselves more holy. But by doing them, we open the doors to our heart, so the Holy Spirit can come in and make us more holy – bring us closer to God.

Consider taking up one of the spiritual disciplines this Lent. Many people associate Lent with giving something up, the spiritual discipline known as fasting. John Wesley suggested Methodists fast from eating food

after their noon meal on Thursday till their evening meal on Friday. I invite the descendants of John Wesley to consider his rule, but check with your doctor first to see if it's safe for you to fast from food.

Fasting is a form of self-denial, sacrificing something which is meaningful to you, in order to allow God to give you something even better. Some fast from particular food, others from behaviors – like watching television or using social media, smoking cigarettes or drinking alcohol. But, Lent is not a mini-self-improvement time. It is a way of saying, “I’m willing to let go of this, in order to allow God to give me something better.”

Others choose to take up something, rather than give something up. Perhaps they will donate time to a volunteer organization, realizing they have been selfish in how they have used their time otherwise. “God,” they say, “Here I am, use me.” Consider the gifts of time, talent and treasure.

Others will use the season of lent to become more aware of how they are living the Christian life – not wanting to be a Christian in name only. And so they will spend a few minutes before going to bed to review the day to see where they stayed close to God, and where they lost contact with God. In our daily review, we confess our sins, and we give thanks to God for his faithfulness.

The reading of Scripture, or doing daily devotions, will help to remind us of who God calls us to be, and allow us to confess when we fall short.

Do you remember “potato salad promise?” one day they shall bury us all, and they’ll go back to the church to eat potato salad. Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return. Let us prepare for that day by keeping a holy Lent. Amen.