

Death Before Life

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TCUMC – Ash Wednesday Service

I. Intro to Ash Wednesday

Good evening. My name is Matt Reynolds and I am the Director of Discipleship here on staff. This evening we begin a very important season, the most important season in the Christian church, Lent. Lent is a season to prepare us for holy week when we celebrate the single most consequential series of events in human history, the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. So Lent is a season of spiritual anticipation and preparation and Ash Wednesday historically begins that time of preparation.

Ash Wednesday traditionally has come to be a day of repentance. It seems to have first been practiced starting in the 8th century. The symbol of ashes stems from an ancient practice described throughout the Old Testament when Jews would dress in sackcloth, a very rough material and pour ashes on themselves as an outer manifestation of inner repentance or mourning. By receiving ashes on our foreheads we are acknowledging our sinfulness and need for forgiveness.

Ashes are a symbol of death. In a practical sense ash is the result of something being burnt. Ashes are the product of the death of someone or something. Ashes symbolize spiritual death too. This symbolism can be seen in the very beginning of God's word. Adam and Eve were originally created to live forever with God, but their choice of sin led to serious consequences—eventual physical death among them. In Genesis 3:19, God says to Adam and Eve, “for dust you are and to dust you shall return.” As we receive ashes on our heads we acknowledge the consequence of our sin and our spiritual deadness.

Ash Wednesday is not only about death and sin, however. In our western tradition the ashes are applied in the shape of a cross to remind us of the hope that we have for redemption through the sacrifice Jesus offered on the cross. As the sign of the cross is marked on our foreheads for all to see we also acknowledge that through Christ, not anything we can do, but through Christ, we can attain new life.

What an incredible paradox this day represents—death that leads to life. While on this day we mourn our sinfulness and acknowledge our need for forgiveness we also look forward to the Easter celebration ahead of us that reminds us that death and sin have been conquered through Jesus work on the cross and his resurrection!

II. God's paradox of life and death

This is something wonderful and mysterious about God's way of doing things. In our understanding we think about living our lives prior to death. But God says, "death before life." And this is typical of the upside down economy of God's kingdom.

We tend to think that more is better and success can be seen in our possessions and status. God on the other hand says "don't store up for yourselves things on this earth where moth and rust destroy...but store up for yourself treasures in heaven."

We tend to think that power comes through position, but Jesus says, "whoever wants to be great among you must become least...like a slave."

The kingdom of God stands in contrast to our way of thinking. God's ways most of the time are opposite of ours.

So, in our world we tend to think of life preceding death. However, in God's world death goes before life. Jesus death leads to eternal life for all that believe and trust him as savior. But even in the present, death to ourselves leads to abundant life now. For God, it is always death before life.

What does this look like? How do we do the sort of dying that leads to real living?

In Luke 17:33 Jesus says, “Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it.”

On this Ash Wednesday how can we die that we might really live?

III. Real Repentance

The death that leads to life comes through repentance. As we confess our sin and turn away from it, we lay our very selves on the alter before God. Repentance seems like it is not a fun word and gets a bad rap, but it is essential to the Christian life.

What is repentance? The Greek word we translate repentance is metanoia and it refers to a complete about face, a change in direction. And from the very beginning this concept of changing our behavior was tied to the gospel message that Jesus proclaimed. In Mark 1:15, Jesus first announces his ministry saying, “repent and hear the Good News, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.” There is an inescapable link between repentance and the good news that God offers through Jesus. Salvation and repentance go hand in hand.

Too often in our culture we settle for a watered down gospel that calls for forgiveness without repentance, salvation without a change of life, grace without gratitude.

Or if we do recognize the need for change, many times we even try to make up for our sins. We almost say to God, “hey let me make it up to you.” But this is impossible when it comes to our utter sinfulness.

No amount of good intentions, nor good efforts can take away your sin, but only true repentance and turning to God who has paid for your sin through Jesus death. As we turn away from ourselves and our sinful ways and turn to God, only then can we experience the new life that God has offered.

Our scripture passage tonight gives us some clues to understanding the attitude of repentance. Let’s look at Luke 18:9-14.

Read passage.

Here we get to see the contrast between a repentant heart and a self-righteous heart. Jesus tells this story by contrasting to polar opposite characters. In their first century culture we are talking about complete opposites. The Pharisee was a member of the religious elite, while the tax collector was despised because of his position and attachment to the Roman

government. We have a situation between the most pious and the most hated.

In a religious story you would certainly expect the Pharisee to get it right, but again this is God's economy, not ours. Jesus says the reverse is true. It is the humble spirit of the tax collector that honors God, not the pious self righteous attitude of the so-called religious man.

Here we see the way to real repentance. Jesus says, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." Real repentance comes through humility.

Unfortunately repentance is a lost art in many Christian circles today. And in this parable we also get a clue to what repentance is NOT. So what are some of the ways that we see this false repentance happen today?

Repentance is not mere confession. "I did it, I'm sorry, I'm horrible." But then you keep on doing what you were doing. Kids do this great. A parent says you need to tell your sister your sorry. "Sorry I hit you...haha." And then he walks away. That is not repentance. That is mere confession. There is no heart change and mind change. Repentance is more than just saying it.

True repentance is not selfish. We don't repent to try to get what we want from God. "God I am so sorry and won't do it again if you would just give me _____."

True repentance is not religious like the Pharisee in the story. Religious people are more worried about the sin of others rather than their own sin. That is not a repentant spirit.

True repentance is not self loathing. Repentance does not mean that we hate ourselves and think we are worthless. In fact it really leads to seeing ourselves with ultimate worth as we understand that despite our desperate broken state, Jesus still died for us. True repentance does not lead to self hate, but a truer sense of self worth as we see our value is found in the identity we gain through Jesus Christ.

Repentance is not any of these things. Rather it is an honest confession of sin, a changing of mind and direction and a dependence on God to change us from the inside out. This sort of repentance is where we say, "I can't do this on my own. My way is not working. I am broken and sinful. God I don't want to live this way any more, give me the strength to live for you. I want to die to my self so that you can live through me." That is the attitude of real repentance. Repentance starts with death but leads to the real life.

So here is the bottom line. Real life only comes after death. We have to die to ourselves and repent of our sin before we can experience the abundant life that God has for us. Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me he must first deny himself, pick up his cross and follow me.” Denying ourselves means literally dying to our own self desires. We have to be nailed to the cross with Christ before we can be raised to new life through him.

On this Ash Wednesday, as we receive the mark of the cross on our heads. Let’s do so with an attitude of real repentance. We recognize our spiritual deadness as we receive the ash, but we see the hope of what is to come as we are reminded by the symbol of the cross.

God took the cross, an instrument of death and torture, and has transformed it to represent life and hope. Jesus had to die before he could rise and defeat death. Tonight we must die to ourselves so that we may really live. Our journey toward the empty tomb always must go by way of the cross.

As we begin this season of Lent, what do you need to surrender to God? What do you need to confess to God? Will you rely on his strength to make a change of direction?

In God's world it is always death before life. The good news is that abundant life lies just on the other side of death. Repentance leads to new life. That is the hope we need as we begin this season of Lent.