

Pastor's Message – Ash Wednesday (2024)
Guided to the Cross: Forgiveness

Welcome to Ash Wednesday. Welcome to the beginning of the season of Lent, and welcome to this journey as we are guided to the cross of Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord.

It has not always been typical to call the 40-day season of Lent a journey. We normally think of Jesus and his journey to the cross. Think of hymns like “Jesus Walked This Lonesome Vally” or “Just a Closer Walk with Thee” or “Lord, Who Throughout These Forty Days” and, as we reflect on Jesus’ walk, we also consider the fact that we are journeying with Jesus on the way to the cross.

Any journey has an element of uncertainty to it. We may have an idea of how things will be when we reach our destination and what we might expect, but we won’t know until we arrive, and it happens. So, what are we going to find at the end of our Lenten journey? What do we expect and is that what will happen? That is what we are exploring tonight and in the weeks to come on the road to Calvary.

As we begin that journey tonight, I get to serve as tour guide to the cross. What do we see on this night, and what will we see along the way?

On this Ash Wednesday, as we look at each other, the first thing we can’t help but see is ashes—ashes placed on our foreheads in the shape of a cross to remind us that we are dust and to dust we shall return. Why ash? Because since ancient times, people wore sackcloth and ashes when they were sorrowful, repentant and grieving, all of which we do this night as we ponder the depth of our sins and the turning away we have done—turning away from God to do our own thing, to follow evil or destructive or prideful paths. We mourn with St. Paul that the bad things we don’t want to do end up being the exact things we do end up doing. Woe to us.

The symbol of ash and dust also points us back to Adam, the first man, whom God made from the dust of the earth and breathed life into. That man Adam would sin, as we all have, and Adam died, as we all will one day, and turned back into dust, as we, too, will when our time on earth is over. We are human; we are finite; we are of the earth and will go back to the earth. There is no getting around that fact. I think it was Benjamin Franklin who said that the only things certain are death and taxes. Death is a fact of life that has no detour.

So, this day, we remember that we are sinners and that we will die. Morbid thoughts for sure. But what makes the difference, even on this sad and somber day? The cross. The ashes are placed on our foreheads in the sign of the cross.

It is the sign of the cross that points us in a new direction, a hopeful direction. Yes, we are sinners, and yes, we will die. But the cross of Christ can help us with

those fundamental problems to our very being. The cross guides us to a fresh start that puts sin behind us and makes death only a steppingstone to everlasting life.

How does this happen? Through forgiveness! Forgiveness is the bedrock upon which we build our faith in Christ. Forgiveness is the foundation of the cross. Not just on Ash Wednesday, not just during Lent, not just on Good Friday, but we can go to the cross again and again to confess our sins and there receive forgiveness.

How do we know this is true? Because Jesus showed forgiveness from the cross in spoken word. He said of those who were putting him on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Our human nature would want to be angry and lash out at those who caused us harm, but Jesus, in his divinity, removed the punishment they deserved by letting their sins go in that moment.

We, like those who tortured Jesus by placing him on the cross, do not always know what we are doing either. We sin, miss the mark, again and again, when we should be loving and reaching out and caring. But what the cross teaches us is that Jesus was not just forgiving a few people on that cross. He was forgiving the whole world. By his suffering and death, he was not just forgiving the sins happening then but the sins of all people who ever lived on earth and the sins of all people who will ever live on earth. His forgiveness from the cross is that great, that all-encompassing, that universal, that complete.

There is no one that Jesus is not forgiving by going to the cross. All those who kneel at the foot of the cross and confess their sins to Christ are forgiven, no questions asked. Our remorse over our sin, our knowledge and acceptance of this amazing gift from the Crucified Christ is what opens the door to an outpouring of unconditional forgiveness and love from our Savior.

As fully forgiven people, then, we should live lives of forgiveness. Our lives should be steered by the guiding principle of forgiveness for all, no matter what they have done. But that is not how the world normally operates. In our world today, there is a lot of emphasis on revenge and vengeance and punishment for wrongdoing. We live in a litigious society and the first words that people often utter when they feel they are wronged are, "I'll sue them."

People have to pay for the bad things they have done, our human nature tells us. There are consequences to our actions and often our words. And we as Christians agree. There is no getting around the fact that someone has to pay for the evils we have done.

But what the cross announces to us is that Jesus is the one who pays the price for every sin committed. We are no longer subject to the wrath of God for our sins, and therefore, no one should be subject to our wrath when people come to us confessing their sins. The first words out of our mouths in those circumstances

should be “I forgive you!” Because of Christ and the cross, the sin is no more, so our anger toward it should be no more.

Forgiveness is a hard concept to wrap our minds around sometimes, especially when we encounter sinful behavior again and again and again. It was hard for the disciples to comprehend, too, it seems. We get a glimpse of the disciples’ struggle with sin when Peter asks Jesus, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” (Matthew 18:21). That seemed enough to Peter; that was way more than enough according to Jewish teaching. Still, he’s thinking, “there’s got to be a limit.” Contrary to Jewish teaching, Jesus tells him just the opposite, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times,” a clever way of saying there is no limit to the number of times you should forgive someone (Matthew 18:23). Forgiveness is forever. Forgiveness should always be in our hearts and on our lips.

And because of the cross, we know for certain that forgiveness is not some passing fancy or something we just do now and then and only to those we love. No, forgiveness from the cross is forever. It is something that is already accomplished. It is something that can never be taken away from us. It is something that still makes up a part of our everyday life. Because even though Christ defeated sin on the cross, sin still exists in the world and always will until Jesus returns on the Last Day and takes us to heaven where there will be no sin evermore. The war is won, but the battles go on. Now in this post-cross world, we can combat every sin with immediate forgiveness. We can experience freedom from sin on a daily basis as we confess our sins to God in Jesus’ name.

There are many times in the Bible when Jesus makes it clear that forgiveness should be top priority. When the paralyzed man was lowered down into the house where Jesus was, the first thing Jesus did was forgive the man’s sins before he healed him of his paralysis. He let the woman caught in adultery go without punishment. He told a parable about a master who forgave the great debt of a servant, but then that servant angrily ordered a debtor of his to pay him back immediately. Jesus made it known that he wanted us to show mercy to our fellow travelers on this road of life, as God has shown us such great mercy by forgiving our many sins.

Jesus had no problem spending time with “sinners,” those considered outcasts and eating with them. He said he came not for those who were well but those who were sick. There was a continuous thread throughout his ministry of being there to help those who were considered sinful. Consider Zacchaeus, who was a tax collector guilty of overcharging people for what they owed the Roman government. When Jesus came into Zacchaeus’ town, Jesus did not shun him, but asked to come to his home, a great honor. Zacchaeus responded to Jesus’ generosity by saying he would pay back all he had overcharged, and Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this

house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:9-10). What forgiving words! The one who was shunned and an outcast from his community was welcomed back. Some Bible scholars have noted that in many printed Bibles, these words from Jesus appear on the exact middle page of the book. It is indeed the central and most essential point of Scripture that Jesus comes to bring salvation to the least and the lost.

And who are the least and the lost? Not just the poor, not just the sick, not just who are in prison: all of us. As the Bible tells us, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23) and so are in need of forgiveness. There is no other way to think about it. We are lost because sin is present in our lives, But knowing that Jesus is present in our lives and knowing that he went to the cross for us guide us to a lifestyle that is in line with the ministry values of Christ. Who are those you can forgive today that perhaps you are not too eager to forgive? Go to them and forgive them. Who are those you need to ask forgiveness from for something unchristian-like you did to them. Go to them and ask for their forgiveness. Huge weights of guilt and shame can be lifted from our shoulders when we share and receive forgiveness.

There are many ways to symbolize the power of forgiveness in our lives. Some rituals include writing our sins on small individual pieces of paper and then burning them or ripping them up and throwing them away. Some churches will write those sins on a piece of paper and nail them to a cross. There is also the practice of washing, which can capture the effect of forgiveness upon us physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Taking a shower or just washing our face each morning is a good reminder to us that the mercies of the Lord are new every morning through our baptisms. We are cleansed of our sins in Christ each day through his blood shed for us on the cross. Like dirt that falls from our bodies when we bathe or shower, so the stain of our sin falls away from us when we drench ourselves in the message of salvation in Christ Crucified.

By the death of Christ, we wear the robe of righteousness he has placed upon us. Death no longer looms as a frightening end to living or a cruel sentence handed down to us by an unsympathetic judge. Death is now but a doorway to a life renewed and restored by Christ. There is no fear in death for those who are forgiven in Jesus, and there is no dread in looking to the cross where Jesus died. We can look death in the face and say, “Where is your sting?” We can turn our eyes directly to the cross and say, “In the cross of Christ I glory!”

Beginning again on this Ash Wednesday, through our 40-day journey of Lent, let us be guided to the cross. Be guided to Jesus. Be guided to forgiveness. You have come to salvation in a Savior who never gives up, who never turns away from you and who never will. Let us never give up on him or on one another in response. Amen.