

Ash Wednesday

February 14, 2024

The “Why” of Love and Forgiveness

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

—Ash Wednesday Day Service, Book of Common Prayer

This year we have an unusual convergence of Ash Wednesday and Valentine’s Day, both occurring on the same day. While these two days stand for something quite different, there is a teaching story that provides wisdom on how to approach both.

Imagine a person buying a beautiful bouquet of flowers for someone they love for Valentine’s Day. When the beloved person receives the flowers, they are touched and extremely grateful. Now imagine the person, after giving the flowers, carelessly adds, “Well, it is Valentine’s Day, and this is what a person is supposed to do, right? Plus, I didn’t want you to be mad at me if I didn’t do something for you today.” Then they walk away.

Ouch! The flowers, in and of themselves, would have been a wonderful gift. But when the person says, “This is what a person is supposed to do, and I just didn’t want you to be mad at me,” all of the positive energy of the gift of the flowers disappears. Why? Because the giver of the flowers revealed that their giving was motivated not by love, but by obligation and even fear. Giving someone a gift because you feel obligated or afraid is very different than offering that same gift to express genuine love and delight. This is where Ash Wednesday and Valentine’s Day have something in common.

Our intentions regarding how we approach these special days make all the difference. We have often heard people come to the season of Lent with an attitude of, “I feel like I have to do something to be a good Christian, and I certainly don’t want God to be disappointed in me.” In matters of love, as in celebrating Valentine’s Day and Lent, the “why” we do something is as important as the “what” we do.

ASH WEDNESDAY

We invite all of us to approach Lent this year, not from a place of guilt or obligation, but from a place of love and as a wonderful opportunity for spiritual growth.

Concerning our specific focus for this year's devotional, the invitation to us all is to approach the practice of forgiveness from a similar desire—not as something we ought to do, but as something we want to do. Practicing forgiveness will help us grow our spiritual life and deepen our relationships with God and others.

For those who attend Ash Wednesday services today, when the sign of the cross is marked on your forehead with ashes, these words will be said: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

These words are not intended to make us feel bad, but to remind us of the truth of our mortality. There is great wisdom in remembering these words as we begin our focus on practicing forgiveness because they humbly remind us that our time on this earth is limited. So there is no time like the present to deepen our practice of forgiveness for others and ourselves.

As we begin our journey through Lent and focus on practicing forgiveness, we pray that we all approach this journey with humble hearts, minds, and souls, open to learning what God has to teach us.

Making it Personal: What thoughts and intentions are you aware of as we begin this season of Lent? What hopes do you have regarding our theme of practicing forgiveness? What is your response to the words, “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return”?



Thursday, February 15, 2024

Deciding to Forgive

Forgiveness is freedom. Forgiveness is liberation. Forgiveness is a choice.

—Ernest Agyemang Yeboah

In week three of this devotional, we will more deeply explore forgiveness as a decision, a choice. Today, as we begin our focus on practicing forgiveness, we want to introduce this idea so that we can begin thinking about the decisions or choices we want to make this Lent.

In reflecting on love, psychologist Eric Fromm wrote, “love is a decision.” We think he meant that actual love is more than simply a feeling. Because feelings ebb and flow, he found it more helpful to focus on the idea that love is also a decision, an act of the will, something strong and true, rather than fleeting and changeable.

Forgiveness is also a decision that we can choose to make. We can choose to forgive for many different reasons, as we will soon discover. Yet, regardless of the reason, we don’t have to wait until the hurt has subsided, or until we have a strong desire to forgive. We can choose to forgive even when we still feel vulnerable. Or we can choose to forgive when we decide that the weight of holding on to the pain is no longer in our own best interest.

Perhaps you can think of a time when you made a decision to forgive someone. Or maybe you can think of a time when you benefited from the gift of someone who has decided to forgive you. As we continue our journey through Lent, we will all be invited to reflect on any decisions we wish to make regarding forgiveness at this point in our lives.

Making it Personal: What do you think of the idea that forgiveness is a decision? What has helped you decide to forgive in the past? Can you think of a current situation or person that you would like to consider making the decision to forgive?

Friday, February 16, 2024

A Season for Growth and Renewal

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Give me the joy of your saving help again.

—Psalm 51:11,13

Over time, the season of Lent has evolved to signify different things for different people. For many it has become a welcome season that provides time set apart to go deeper in their faith journey. For others, the season of Lent has come to represent a negative time because of the connection to guilt it has for them.

Some observe Lent by giving up something for the duration of the season, while others like to take something on. And others practice some combination of both. With this in mind, each Wednesday we will offer an invitation to try a spiritual practice related to the theme of forgiveness. Along with additional practices you can find in the back of this devotional, these reflections will include ideas and suggestions for things you might want to take on as part of your Lenten journey.

The writers of this devotional approach Lent as a season for growth and renewal. This mindset is also described in the words of Psalm 51, which are found in the Ash Wednesday readings in many churches: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew [put a new and right] a right spirit within me. Give me the joy of your saving help again.”

Whether we are giving something up, or taking something on, Lent is an opportunity for us to open our hearts to God and experience the renewal of our spirits.

Making it Personal: When observing the season of Lent, has your experience been more positive, negative, or neutral? Are you drawn more to the idea of giving something up or taking something on for Lent—or both? If you desire an experience of a renewed spirit this Lent, what do you hope that looks like for you?



Saturday, February 17, 2024

Listening to the Whispers

Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.

—Frederick Buechner

Our lives are always speaking to us; the question is, are we listening? Each Saturday this Lent, we will take a few moments to “listen to the whispers,” pausing to pay attention to what we have experienced and learned during the week. This first week is a short week because we began with Ash Wednesday, but it is helpful for us to get in the habit of using the space we’ll provide each Saturday for noticing what whispers you have sensed this week related to forgiveness.

God often speaks to us more in a whisper than a shout. The whisper might come during a time of quiet reflection or prayer. It might come during a conversation with another person. It could also come from something our bodies are saying to us. A whisper is like a warning light on a car’s dashboard. It may not require immediate attention, but ignoring it will likely create more difficulty.

We are more likely to ignore God’s whispers if what we are sensing makes us uncomfortable. This can certainly happen as we explore the theme of practicing forgiveness. Painful feelings may arise, and our first instinct may be to ignore them. Remembering that the process of change and growth is almost always uncomfortable (initially) can help us stay present to the whispers and invitations for growth that the Spirit is offering us.

Making it Personal: Looking back on the readings for these first few days of Lent and your own notes, what thoughts were most important for you? Are you aware of any discomfort as you begin to focus on practicing forgiveness? If so, can you sit and perhaps learn from that discomfort as you listen to what God might be saying to you?

