

“The Exercise of Reconciliation”
Ash Wednesday
2 Cor. 5:20b–6:8; Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

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It intrigues me that we continue to observe something as a religious practice which is so counter-cultural as Ash Wednesday.

It is a sign of repentance, after all, in a culture where no one repents. Politicians always claim they have done nothing illegal. Opponents sue one another for breach of contract, and then settle out of court in a sealed settlement agreement where no one has to admit wrong-doing. There are “no-fault” divorces. And a major television actor carries on with prostitutes without shame or regret because, I guess, they’re the best in the industry.

By my lights, it is the culture which is pretty screwed up, but that only illustrates that we are bucking trends, folks, to come together, to kneel, to ask forgiveness, and to come to terms with our own mortality.

This morning, before our Noon service, I had about a dozen students here from the Art Institute of California based in North Hollywood, who were on a field trip to see the Gudwara Temple, our church, and the Self-Realization Fellowship, to explore different religious practices. I spoke briefly about the church and our ministries, and about Lent and Ash Wednesday.

Ash Wednesday is difficult to explain to outsiders, I thought, because it is so unlike anything our culture likes or enjoys or celebrates. To quote this verse from Genesis 3:19, where the Lord God expels Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, is to remind people of death. “you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

And as “Exhibit A,” I briefly brought out from our rear Altar a small box, enclosed in a blue velvet bag, which contains the ashes of one of our local saints who had died. Whether we live our lives poorly or in desperation, or live our lives well, with many successes, comforts and triumphs, life still comes to an end and can be reduced to a small box of ashes.

In spite of that sobering sign, seven of these young people asked, before they left, to receive the sign of the Cross etched with ashes upon their foreheads.

But Ash Wednesday is only the place we begin the season of Lent, not where we end. It would be a major “downer” if the Gospel had no message except death and defeat. But the Gospel is the word which means “Good News,” and the Good News we proclaim is that the Creator, the God who gives life to all things living, has reconciled with Creation, and rather than offering nothing but mortality and death, offers healing, wholeness, life and joy.

Even Jesus counsels us not to look dismal, as if exaggerating the burdens and pains of Lent would bring us salvation. Instead, he said, groom yourself, take care of yourself, wash your face, do your hair, and keep your self-discipline private, between you and God.

Maybe this is odd, but I think of self-discipline as something which an athlete or body-builder might compare to training. Training is a self-discipline to become stronger, not to worry or obsess *or brag* about pain. Self-discipline and training are signs of progress, not failure.

And so if we accept, or take on a self-discipline in Lent, it should be to make ourselves stronger, to make spiritual progress, to grow in wisdom and resilience, beginning with the heart, until our lives reflect an inner strength and power.

St. Paul has perhaps the best image for this kind of spiritual growth, and it is not a “downer,” at all! He begins, in tonight’s First Reading, “We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”

Reconciliation is good news, my friends. Reconciliation is when two people or two parties which have been at odds, or not on speaking terms, or even enemies, make up and put past gripes and grudges behind them in order to build a new relationship.

I know, reconciliation with God is something that terrifies people. I frequently refer to people who think they cannot dare to “darken the door” of a church. If they think of it at all, the Judgement Day is a distant terror to be avoided. The idea of starting over to build a new relationship *with God Almighty* seems impossible because it implies we are in deep, deep trouble, and that God is very, very angry.

And it would seem that could be the case, because, after all, human beings took God’s beloved Son, rejected him, accused him of crimes he did not commit, and got rid of him by means of capital punishment. If you knew in your heart that you were guilty of killing an innocent man, would you be optimistic about reconciling with his Father?

But St. Paul entreats his audience, *begs them*, to reconcile with God. How is this possible?

It is possible because the Good News assures us that God has already reconciled with us. God is not holding our sins and shortcomings over our heads. God is not wagging the divine finger at us. God is not threatening eternal damnation.

Quite the opposite. God has unilaterally declared a new relationship with humanity, not *in spite of* what we did to Jesus on the Cross, *but because of* what Christ did for us upon the Cross. His death was his own gift of life, that we might not be condemned but have new life in Christ’s name.

What does that really mean, though, in particular?

I think it means that, not only, do we *not* have to run from God or be afraid of our Father in heaven, we also do not have to run away from ourselves, or be afraid to face the truth about ourselves.

Reconciling with God means seeking the things that can heal us, change us, bring us peace of mind, self-esteem, and joy.

Reconciling with God means finding *in God* the strength we need for training and personal development so that we really do live life well.

Some of you know I’ve been seeing a physical therapist for some weeks now because of severe pain in my knees. I have arthritis all over, but it is worse in the knees. And I admit that when I first went to the Physical Therapist, I basically felt this was a kind of stalling mechanism on my doctor’s part. He is not ready to recommend knee surgery or even a shot or an MRI until I jump through the hoops and say, okay, I’ve tried physical therapy, so now *do something*.

But the therapist has not only worked with my knees, he has also worked on my attitude, my understanding of my body, aging and pain. He proved to me that most of the feeling I’ve had that the knee was going to just “give out on me,” was not the knee joint structure itself, but weakness in the surrounding muscles. The therapy is working on strengthening the muscles so they can take the worst pressure off the arthritic joint.

Now, this is turning out to be a metaphor, so stay with me.

My improvement, however, is slow. I’m still not sure that I’m making much progress. I asked him about seeing an orthopedist, etc. And he doesn’t rule that out, but he suggests even if—now get this—even if a doctor agrees that a shot or a surgical procedure could help or even fix what is torn inside my knee joint, its purpose would be to enable me to go on training—to go on exercising and strengthening the muscles which are weak.

It took me a while to wrap my mind around that one. I mentally argued with it, but it is gradually sinking in that there is truth there.

So too there is truth that redemption and reconciliation through the Cross will only help you and me if we are willing and ready to come from the other direction, reconcile with God and this

gracious offer of new life, and then through spiritual exercise and discipline, grow stronger inside to be able to meet the challenges of life.

So we have this same language in the middle steps of the 12-steps. Does this sound like a spiritual exercise program to you? Listen:

“4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves. 5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs. 6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.”

Tonight, we have at least stepped up again, at the beginning of Lent, to take a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves. In the act of Confession, we are admitting to God and in the presence of one another, that we have faults, we have screwed up, we have come up very short, not only of what God expects of us but what we expect of ourselves. But Confession is like seeing the therapist *without any intention of working on ourselves*, unless we can say we are “entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.”

But if we reconcile with God, we put ourselves into the hands of the Almighty Therapist, who will indeed work on what is wrong within, and ease our pain, but also point out exercises that will strengthen us, and then go right on expecting that we have homework to do, exercises and training to keep up, and to not just see them as a “quick fix” but make them a part of our lives.

I have often said, “God loves you *as you are*, but God does not *leave you* as you are.”

So if we come to God, we come without fear of judgment. But we should come with expectation that we will change. That the power and love and patience and yes, therapy, of God, will change us and reconcile us to living as Christ’s people in the world. Amen?