

We have a lot of messages coming at us on Ash Wednesday.

Many of prayers we say focus us on ourselves –

on self-examination and repentance, on self-denial and sobriety.

The way we have inherited Lent, it can become a very individual thing;

very concerned with our own piety – our own sins, our own prayer life.

We may deny ourselves things that have some personal meaning or pleasure,

or take on spiritual practices that retrain us for the life of faith we want to live.

These aspects of Lent are all very important.

Nurturing our relationship with God, and clearing space in our lives and hearts

for God to nurture His relationship with us –

these crucial for living vital, joyful lives as Christians.

But it's not the whole picture.

A lot of the Bible is concerned with God telling us what a "right sacrifice" is,

how God wants us to be in relationship to God and to each other.

More than fasting from chocolate or wine, the kind of fast God desires for us

is one that breaks us out of our self-enclosed, self-sufficiency

and immerses us in a greater depth of community.

The benefits are intended to build us up,

but they are also meant for a much wider purpose:

The healing of broken relationships, the repairing of broken streets;

The healing and bringing together of the whole world, the entire cosmos.

And rarely have the wounds of the world shown in such sharp relief.

We cannot get away from them. And I don't think God wants us to.

Those wounds are why Jesus came; those wounds are what God is still in the business of healing through us as we allow God's Spirit to flow through us.

What we are to do during Lent, my friends, is to clear a bigger and wider channel for the Holy Spirit to flow through us. That is our Lenten work.

Jesus tells us that we are to be blessed as peacemakers.

St. Paul reminds us that we are called to God's ministry of reconciliation.

Reconciliation is the word our church uses for what used to be called

"the sacrament of penance," that process by which we

confess our sins in repentance and are reconciled to God.  
But if that was all this was about, we could cut this trip pretty short.  
As Christians we stand in the light of God's mercy and forgiveness.  
After all, Psalm 103 reminds us, that God:

*Has not dealt with us according to our sins,  
nor rewarded us according to our wickedness.  
For as the heavens are high above the earth,  
so is his mercy great upon those who fear him.  
As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our sins from us.*

That is what Paul writes in Corinthians – that God already reconciled us to himself through Christ, not counting people's sins against them. This was not a cheap or casual action – it was enormously costly for God, the sacrifice that Jesus made for us in becoming one of us, in dying on the cross. But *God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that we should not perish but have eternal life.*

In this reconciliation accomplished on the cross, God has done more than set us free: God has committed to us the ministry of reconciliation. God has invited us to participate with Him in the healing of broken relationships, in repairing ancient ruins, rebuilding streets for people to live in.

So, on the one hand we are called to intentional self-examination, seeking to be purified of the accumulated dross of sin and pain and anger, to be made transparent, pure gold in God's service.

We are called to offer to God the sacrifice He wants – our selves.

What really counts in your life – chocolate, or your time?

This passage from Isaiah continues with a section where the prophet tells the people that if they really want to please God they will keep the Sabbath.

I don't know about you, but I am far from this.

I live as though my god is my to-do list – and that's a jealous little god.

I live to please it – to appease it, to cross things off it so I'll feel better,

and lo and behold, it multiplies new to-do's right before my very eyes.

And it whispers that if I just keep at it, 7 days a week,

eventually I'll cross them all off and feel free, but that's a lie.

Freedom, God says, is in trusting Him, in putting Jesus above the to-do list.

Freedom is in taking one whole day a week to be non-productive.

But all the self-examination and offering have a greater purpose.  
These Lenten disciplines to which we are called, whatever they may be,  
are not given just to “toughen us up.”  
They are given to us to make us more effective disciples.  
We are disciples who have been entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation,  
a message the world needs to hear,  
a reality the world needs to see reflected in our lives.  
For some of us being more intentional about the ministry of reconciliation  
will lead us to greater involvement with the poor and oppressed,  
breaking the yoke, breaking down barriers of class and race and economic status.

You may be called to a greater engagement with the poor, whether as a church or as individuals. Or you may be called to a greater engagement as peace-makers even within your own families. Some of you will find ourselves called to play a greater role in reconciling conflicts in our families or communities, breaking down barriers of anger or envy or pride, to be peace-makers who bring people together.

Then, together, we become ambassadors for Christ,  
disciples representing the good news of our reconciliation to the world.  
Let us commit ourselves this Lent not only to giving up,  
but to taking on this ministry of reconciliation,  
of spreading peace and good news.

Then, we are promised, will our light break forth like the dawn.  
Then will our healing come quickly, says the prophet.  
Then will we be a well-watered garden; like a spring whose waters never fail,  
because we are drinking the water of eternal life,  
which Jesus promised is a spring inside us, welling up to eternal life –  
and those who drink from that water never thirst again.

Amen.

**II Corinthians 5:17 - 6:10**

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you."

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see – we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

**Matthew 5:1-12**

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.