

Today/Tonight as we enter into the season of Lent we come before the Lord confessing our need for salvation, confessing those things that separate us from God and from one another. Today, we return to the Lord.

Joel speaking on behalf of the Lord proclaims: “return to me, the Lord, with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and with mourning. Rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord.”

The practice for a person in mourning, at the time of Joel, was to display the outward signs of mourning by weeping and tearing their clothes, rending their clothes, they put on the sack cloth and walked around so that others could see their grief.

Joel, speaking the word of the Lord, says don't rend your clothing, rend your heart, tear your heart wide open and expose the things for which you need forgiveness, expose the things that separate you from the Lord, so that as you return to the Lord, your heart can be healed, your heart can be strengthened and made whole once more.

The Apostle Paul proclaims in 2nd Corinthians, the fifth chapter, be reconciled to God. You see that's what Lent is about. It's about returning to the Lord. It's about being reconciled to God. We can do that with courage and boldness for we know the extent that God goes to relent from punishing, the extent that God goes to make love known to us.

The Prophet Joel proclaims the promise that our God is gracious and merciful; slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, who relents from punishing. This is the Lord God who loves us, who is gracious and merciful to us even in the midst of our yuckiness - of our sin, of our dirt, of everything that separates us from the Lord and from each other.

It is this Lord God who, as Paul says, for our sake made Jesus to be sin who knew no sin so that in him, in Christ, we might become the righteousness of God.

You see, this is the extent that God goes to restore us, to reconcile us, for we ourselves cannot be reconciled to God on our own.

Luther describes sin as being turned in on ourselves, about navel gazing, it's as if we're so busy looking at what we want, what we need – that we can't look up to see God and look out to see our neighbor in need.

God knew that we couldn't become the righteousness of God, be reconciled, on our own. Humanity demonstrated this ongoing struggle throughout the whole scripture story. Time and time again, we hear of the ways that God reaches out to God's people calling them to faithfulness. God's people return to the Lord for a time but then they lose their way. They forget how to live faithfully. So God acts again in grace and mercy and restores the people one more time.

God continues reaching out to us, reconciling us - not by anything that we do ourselves – but by God's love alone until ultimately God chooses to come to us in the person of Jesus.

God extends love one more time in a real and tangible way as Jesus walks among God's people curing disease, healing the hurts, and releasing the captives. But again the people go astray and fail to see the love of God being made known to them in Christ and so he is arrested. He is tried, he suffers, is crucified - he spends three days in the tomb and then God does another new thing, rolling the stone away and so Christ emerges – reconciling us to God forever.

It is in Christ that we have the courage to confess our sin, to pray with the Psalmist, “Create in me a clean heart O, God and renew a right spirit within me.”

We offer our confession today/tonight and tomorrow and all the tomorrows to come trusting and knowing that our God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and relenting from punishment.

It is that character of God that loves us so completely that gives us the gift of confession- not because God needs to hear it - but because we need to say it. It's the gift that God gives to us, allowing us to put our words out there, to rend our hearts, so that once more we can be reminded of that deep and abiding love of God.

Having been reminded of God’s great love for us we can go out into the world, not to live as hypocrites do, offering our prayers on the street corners just so people can look at us and say "Oh wow" look how spiritual she is. Not to offer our alms so that we feel better or so that we can say to ourselves God's gonna love me now - because I'm helping the needy, I'm feeding the poor.

No, the disciplines of lent – prayer, almsgiving and fasting – are done not as outward signs to earn God's love, to earn God's forgiveness.

Instead, the disciplines of Lent are our grateful response to who God is - who God is for us and for all creation. We live the disciplines of lent as a loving response as we make Christ known and share the love that we have so graciously received with others.

Ash Wednesday – Feb 18, 2015

Joel 2:1–2, 12–17, Psalm 51:1–17, 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10, Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

As you consider what might be your Lenten discipline this year, may I encourage you to consider adding a spiritual practice rather than giving something up. Add something that will be meaningful to you and will deepen your relationship with the God who loves you so completely. Consider, a more intentional time of prayer, try journaling to reflect on where you see God at work in your life, commit to doing random acts of kindness for others, try out a new opportunity to serve those in need. The possibilities are limitless.

The goal of a Lenten discipline is not to suffer through the absence of something only to add it back in to your life on Easter Sunday. Rather, the goal of a Lenten discipline is to develop a more intentional way of living faithfully with the God who loves you.

And so today/tonight as you offer confession, as you have your forehead marked with the cross of Christ, as you hear the words “remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return” and face your mortality know that your life here and now is not the end.

The Lord God who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love is the God who reaches out to you this day/night with bread and wine, who washes you clean in the waters of baptism, and who sends you out to share that love with others. Again and again and again for we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything. Thanks be to God. AMEN!