

Let It Go: Learning to Let Go

Rev. Cameron D St.Michael – February 18 2025

Ash Wednesday

Readings: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 CEB

Greeting: Trust in the Lord with all your heart; don't rely on your own intelligence. Know him in all your paths, and he will keep your ways straight. Don't consider yourself wise. Fear the Lord and turn away from evil. Then your body will be healthy and your bones strengthened.

Prayer: O God, maker of everything and judge of all that you have made, from the dust of the earth you have formed us and from the dust of death you would raise us up. By the redemptive power of the cross, create in us clean hearts and put within us a new spirit, that we may repent of our sins and lead lives worthy of your calling; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our scripture readings for today come from the Common English Bible. Our first reading is from Joel chapter 2 verses 1 through 2 and verses 12 through 17.

¹ Blow the horn in Zion; give a shout on my holy mountain! Let all the people of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming. It is near— ² a day of darkness and no light, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness spread out upon the mountains, a great and powerful army comes, unlike any that has ever come before them, or will come after them in centuries ahead.¹² Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your hearts, with fasting, with weeping, and with sorrow; ¹³ tear your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, very patient, full of faithful love, and ready to forgive. ¹⁴ Who knows whether he will have a change of heart and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God? ¹⁵ Blow the horn in Zion; demand a fast; request a special assembly. ¹⁶ Gather the people; prepare a holy meeting; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants. Let the groom leave his room and the bride her chamber. ¹⁷ Between the porch and the altar let the priests, the Lord's ministers, weep. Let them say, "Have mercy, Lord, on your people, and don't make your inheritance a disgrace, an example of failure among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, "Where is their God?"'" (Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 CEB+)

Our next reading is from 2 Corinthians chapter 5 verse 20b through chapter 6 verse 10.

^{20b} We beg you as Christ's representatives, "Be reconciled to God!" ²¹ God caused the one who didn't know sin to be sin for our sake so that through him we could become the

righteousness of God. **6** ¹ Since we work together with him, we are also begging you not to receive the grace of God in vain. ² He says, I listened to you at the right time, and I helped you on the day of salvation. Look, now is the right time! Look, now is the day of salvation! ³ We don't give anyone any reason to be offended about anything so that our ministry won't be criticized. ⁴ Instead, we commend ourselves as ministers of God in every way. We did this with our great endurance through problems, disasters, and stressful situations. ⁵ We went through beatings, imprisonments, and riots. We experienced hard work, sleepless nights, and hunger. ⁶ We displayed purity, knowledge, patience, and generosity. We served with the Holy Spirit, genuine love, ⁷ telling the truth, and God's power. We carried the weapons of righteousness in our right hand and our left hand. ⁸ We were treated with honor and dishonor and with verbal abuse and good evaluation. We were seen as both fake and real, ⁹ as unknown and well known, as dying—and look, we are alive! We were seen as punished but not killed, ¹⁰ as going through pain but always happy, as poor but making many rich, and as having nothing but owning everything. (2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10 CEB+)

Our next reading is from Matthew chapter 6 verses 1 through 6 and verses 16 through 21.

¹ “Be careful that you don't practice your religion in front of people to draw their attention. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. ² “Whenever you give to the poor, don't blow your trumpet as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets so that they may get praise from people. I assure you, that's the only reward they'll get. ³ But when you give to the poor, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing ⁴ so that you may give to the poor in secret. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you. ⁵ “When you pray, don't be like hypocrites. They love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners so that people will see them. I assure you, that's the only reward they'll get. ⁶ But when you pray, go to your room, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you. ¹⁶ “And when you fast, don't put on a sad face like the hypocrites. They distort their faces so people will know they are fasting. I assure you that they have their reward. ¹⁷ When you fast, brush your hair and wash your face. ¹⁸ Then you won't look like you are fasting to people, but only to your Father who is present in that secret place. Your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ¹⁹ “Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth, where moth and rust eat them and where thieves break in and steal them. ²⁰ Instead, collect treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moth and rust don't eat them and where thieves don't break in and steal them. ²¹ Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 CEB+)

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of our Lent series, “Let It Go.” I decided to do this series because I was thinking about the way that we give things up for Lent and what they are

supposed to embody for us. And so, I wanted to talk throughout Lent about the things that we can let go of and we will look at letting go of temptation, entitlement, division, presumptions, and doubt. For this Ash Wednesday, I wanted to think about learning to let go. We hear it in our readings for today and it is central to this concept that we have of Lent. Especially with Ash Wednesday. Because part of what Ash Wednesday is for me is a remembrance of our mortality. But that mortality isn't a weakness, it is a reminder of our dependence on God to be able to help us and to be able to guide us.

It is that kind of help that we see in our reading from Joel. That when the day of darkness comes upon us, we still have hope. God teaches us how to let go of the things that have been causing us to go astray. That we should turn away from the things that we got wrong and turn back to God. And what does that mean? It means having faithful love. It means being ready to forgive. It means that we should expect God to be able to change our lives if we are willing to let go of the things that hold us back. That we gather together and seek God's mercy. That we call for a fast where we stop indulging in the things that lead us astray and we start thinking about what it is God wants for us. That we prepare ourselves for God's love and God's mercy by letting go of the things that distract us from it. That is a big part of what Lent is. Because we prepare ourselves to remember the sacrifice Christ made on us on the cross and the life that we have because of him.

We are to let go of the things that hold us back and hold us down and to turn back to God. Because he is the one that will help us. We hear of this in our reading from 2 Corinthians. That we should be made right with God. That we should accept God's grace and not do it in vain. I think what he means by this is that we shouldn't just accept it and think we have nothing to do on our end. Yes, God's gift of grace is free for all people. But in essence, we reject it when we don't take that grace and let it transform our lives. When we see the light and still turn back to the darkness, we are not accepting God's grace. Today is a day of humility.

Humility is what we hear from Paul. Not that we should do things to draw criticism from people. Not that we should complain about every hardship that we come through. Paul talks about all the things that he had to endure. Beatings, imprisonment, sleepless nights, and hunger. But he says the sign that you actually want to serve God is to do all those things with a heart full of genuine love and to tell the truth. He needed no other weapon than righteousness. He can recognize they were treated well and sometimes not very well. Paul basically says, through it all, God is there and that's enough for him. Seen as punished but not killed. Going through pain but always happy. Poor but making many rich. Having nothing but owning everything. Because Paul recognizes the strength he gains through Christ.

And then we have Jesus reminding us of how it is we should avoid falling into the ways of the world. That if we are going to fast, if we are going to let go of the things that hold us back, we need to recognize the spiritual practices that will make us weak instead of strong. That we aren't to practice our religion in front of people. That we should do our good works

quietly and joyfully. Not that we do it for show, not that we do it for recognition, but because we do it because it is the right thing to do. That we give to those who are in need, not with showy gestures, but quietly. When we pray, we do it privately, not out on the street corners. Because we should go to be there with God in our time of prayer, not to show off to anyone else. Because we aren't meant to be seen by others practicing our prayers. We are meant to be coming closer to God. We have to let go of that need for attention. And that need for attention is part of all of the things that we will be looking at. Because in the weeks to come, we will see how that need for attention drives us to do many things. So, we shouldn't distort our faces just because we are doing something that might be a little uncomfortable as we fast. We shouldn't be storing up treasures just for treasure's sake. Because we should be saving up our love for God.

Because we can't take it with us. None of those earthly things will follow us from one place to the next, but love will. When we can let go of all those things that tie us to selfish desires, from wanting attention, from that need to appear greater, we find the humility of dust cloth and ashes. And we remember that we humble ourselves to be closer to Christ. Because we remember how low he brought himself so that he could lift us up. Ash Wednesday is about us remembering that humility. That our mission in Christ is not about fame and fortune. It is not about the attention that we can get in this life. It is not about the things we can store up. It is not the power that we could hold. Lent is a season of letting go. So let us learn to trust God. Trusting the presence of the Holy Spirit. Trusting our Heavenly Father will be guiding us every step of the way. Trusting that Christ will be walking with us. That every time that we can give something up for the kingdom of God, we gain something so much more important. Because we gain peace. We gain understanding. We gain wisdom. We gain life itself. Let this Ash Wednesday be a reminder. Ashes to ashes and dust to dust are the things of this life. But the life we lift up together in Christ binds us forever together. Amen.

Invitation to the Observance of Lenten Discipline

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:
 the early Christians observed with great devotion
 the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection,
 and it became the custom of the Church that before the Easter celebration
 there should be a forty-day season of spiritual preparation.

During this season converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism.
 It was also a time when persons who had committed serious sins
 and had separated themselves from the community of faith
 were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness,
 and restored to participation in the life of the Church.

In this way the whole congregation was reminded of the mercy and forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus Christ and the need we all have to renew our faith.

I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to observe a holy Lent:
by self-examination and repentance;
by prayer, fasting, and self-denial;
and by reading and meditating on God's Holy Word.

To make a right beginning of repentance, and as a mark of our mortal nature, let us now kneel before our Creator and Redeemer.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon (Psalm 51 NRSVUE*):

¹ Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. ² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

³ For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. ⁴ Against you, you alone, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. ⁵ Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

⁶ You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. ⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. ⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. ⁹ Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. ¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. ¹⁴ Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. ¹⁶ For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. ¹⁷ The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal with Blessing: May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Current Series – Let It Go

Our series for Lent is all about what we can give up as we follow Christ. "Let It Go" starts with an introduction on Ash Wednesday and then goes through the different things we can let go of. We explore the idea of giving things up for Lent as we explore how we can let go of temptation, entitlement, division, presumptions, and doubt. Let us work together to let go of worldly desires as we walk towards the cross.

2/18: Learning to Let Go	2/22: Temptation	3/1: Entitlement
3/8: Division	3/15: Presumptions	3/22: Doubt

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