

First Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Erin Gilmore
March 5, 2017
Christ, Our Treasure

Psalm 32

Prayer:

The season of Lent. I am curious – what do you associate with Lent? What feelings or words do you associate with Lent?

My sense is that it is not an obviously popular season. On the most surface level, its that season when you have to give something up – be it chocolate or beer or sugar or whining about your relatives. Not necessarily something we would say is fun...On a deeper level, it is this season of truth-telling, of being honest before God, admitting you are human, acknowledging our failures, recognizing our individual and collective sin. Not necessarily an opportunity we jump at.

And yet there are a surprising number of pastors who are saying that Ash Wednesday is becoming one of the most popular services of the year. Rev. Amy Butler saw this happen at a church she served in Washington DC – she writes:

out of all the days of the church year, it's this day –the day we focus on our sin and humanity -- that draws in the most strangers. Every year when I see unfamiliar people wander in among the regulars, I wonder why we all seem to need Ash Wednesday so much. Why do we crave reflective moments to ponder our shortcomings? Reminders of the ways in which we've failed are all around us every day; why seek them out? I am coming to believe that we do because we all desperately need a place to stop for just a little while, to lay down the heavy burdens we carry, to be -- if only for a moment -- honest about who we are.”

The truth is, most of us don't have many places where we can be that real. And while there has always been that cultural pressure to keep up, keep fit, keep it together, keep up with the Jones – we now also have our facebook, snapchat, twitter, instagram world where we get to curate and manufacture the picture of ourselves out in the world and it is rather tempting to show only the brightest and best sides. Again Amy writes; “We're smart and good, pretty and talented, witty and full of great ideas. We go to work every day wearing our titles like Boy Scout

badges informing the world that we know what we're doing. But secretly, we're scared someone will find out that we really don't."

"Our families appear to the world like the picture of happiness, but truth is, we live every day with the pain of disappointment, betrayal and broken relationships. We tell the world we are peaceful and purpose-filled, but inside we're scared and lonely, and we wonder all the time about life's deeper meaning."

In our over achieving, ever blissful, world there is something unexpectedly refreshing about getting to just admit one's shortcomings. To accept imperfection. To acknowledge that we are human, that our hearts break, that our doubts sabotage, that our faith waivers, that our words aren't always helpful, that sometimes we make stupid decisions. It's refreshing because it is simply part of who we are.

Our real suffering actually comes from trying to deny this part of ourselves. Our sin as humans is not that we aren't perfect. God doesn't expect us to be perfect. Our sin is pretending that we have no sin. The sin is the attempt to hide or repress or deny or ignore that we are in fact human. This is what we hear coming from the Psalmist this morning: The psalmist declares, "While I keep silence, my body wasted away, my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer"... Norman Fisher translates it this way, "My bones grew brittle with crying all day..."

In his book *A Hidden Wholeness*, Parker Palmer suggests that when we attempt to hide a part of ourselves, when we deny the fullness of who we are, we eventually see symptoms show up in our life— for him it was depression, but it can show up in all kinds of ways – anxiety, anger, aimlessness, addiction.

So was true for the psalmist. Keeping things hidden from God only led to greater suffering. It is when the psalmist comes clean, admits his guilt, that is when he is met with joy, that is when he is met with grace and forgiveness and experiences deep connection with God and is restored back into a state of peace and well being.

I know there was a time in my own spiritual journey when I thought the prayer of confession felt dogmatic and heavy-handed – transactional prayer – if we say we're sorry then God will forgive us. It made God out to be this angry, vengeful God who somehow requires our repentance in order to love us...

I think a lot of people out there still believe this to be true. I have all kinds of conversations with people who when they find out I am pastor, or when I invite them to come will say, if I walk in there the building might burn down... That place is too good for me... they see that steeple, or the bell tower or that stained glass and they think I am not worthy, I can't go in there, God would never forgive me. It saddens me that this is how people see the church because nothing could be farther from the truth.

If we go back to the psalm for a minute notice that the psalmist is not met with judgment. He is met with grace. . Again in the translation from Norman fisher "many are the pains of the heedless, those who hold back from you, but the one who trusts self all to you will swim in your kindness."

I have come to believe our prayer of confession is less for God and more for us – that it's not something God requires but rather something God uses to help lead us back to wholeness, and into love. I see now that the act of confession, of bringing to light that which is hidden, of being honest about that which is broken, it is a necessary part of living a full and whole and undivided life.

And isn't this what we ultimately long for? To be whole human beings, to live an undivided life. In a just a few minutes we will join our voice together and sing, "May us holy make us whole, in your love make us whole." We long for wholeness, we long for our inner lives and outer lives to be peace with one another. We long for the freedom to be real and to be flawed and to be loved even so. We don't want to have to hide who we are, or pretend we are something we are not, we want to be whole. I think it is this desire that fuels this attraction to services like Ash Wednesday and to seasons like Lent.

We live in a world that doesn't think twice about discarding something when it is broken – we are more likely to just go out and buy a new one then spend time repairing it what is broken. A political career can be discarded on one misstep. A person can so easily be fired and replaced.

So there is incredible power in finding a place where we hear instead this message "you are undiscardable." You are my treasure. You got flaws? I don't care. You messed up? Tell me about it. You life is in pieces? Let's find a way to put it back together. There is no discarding in God's kingdom. There is no three strikes and you're out.

There is no need to put on the happy face or the perfect life, there is no need to hide in the presence of God because God is your hiding place. God is the place where we can bring all the pieces of our lives, the beautiful and the ugly the sacred and the profane, the joyful and the painful, the guilt and the innocence and be held in a love that will not let us go.

I shared a little of this at the Ash Wednesday Service, but throughout the season of Lent this year we are going to be using this image of a vessel. It is an image of a vessel but also a vessel that has been shattered. What do we do with a shattered vessel? Our world would say toss it out, it is of no use. But our faith says something different. Our faith says it can be transformed and made new again.

We have up here pieces of recently shattered glass and pieces of sea glass. I invite you to come forward and take a piece of the sea glass, and let it be for you an image to carry with you throughout the season of lent as a reminder that wholeness is not the absence of brokenness, or adversity or pain. We do not have to hide our imperfection. We do not have to fear our own shadows. In Christ we have been shown the trustworthiness of God. We can come to God and lay down our burdens and bear our souls and in that very vulnerable and exposed place we will be met with the greatest love we have ever known.

Prayer of invocation

God, we come
with hesitant steps
and uncertain motives
to sweep out the corners
where sin has accumulated,
and uncover the ways
we have strayed from Your truth.

Expose the empty and barren places
where we don't allow you to enter.
Reveal our half-hearted struggles
where we have been indifferent
to the suffering of others.

Nurture the faint stirrings of new life,
where your spirit has begun to grow.
Let your healing light transform us
into the image of Your Son.
For You alone can bring new life
and make us whole.

Benediction

May we find the road that leads to life;
may we take the turns that brings right relationships;
may we pause to accompany others on the way;
and may we journey with God through Lent,
and long for the horizon and dawn.

And the grace.