



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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ASH WEDNESDAY

MY HEART AS SANCTUARY, MY LIFE AS PRAYER

It's Me, O Lord

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; II Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Many mornings, after reading through the morning news, I need a lighter thought, a laugh to balance all of the dark news that consumes the pages of our newspapers. I often turn to the back of the sports section or classified ads where I will find the comics. Ah, blessed comics: a brief respite from the news of the day. One of my favorite comics is *Family Circus*. It's always there in a circle, right beside the *Word Jumble* and *B.C.* Those four kids are always good for a smile if not an out-loud laugh. One of the recurring themes of this comic always shows one of the parents asking those sweet-faced, innocent looking children a question like: "Which of you broke my good plate?", "Who threw sunflower seeds all over the floor?", "Who knocked over Dolly's snowman?", "Who got into the box of chocolates I got for Mommy?", "Who deleted all of my emails?", or "Who stapled the calendar so I can't turn it to September?" And the answer is always, "Not me!" Frequently there will be a mischievous little ghost named "Not Me" running away.

I daresay when we grow up, that little ghost grows up with us and "Not Me" is responsible for a whole lot of things that go on in the world. "Not me!" is often the first answer to a question that begins with, "Who is responsible for"

You may feel that Lent is like *Family Circus*. It may seem as if Lent is nothing more than six long weeks of God looking our way and asking, "Who did this? Who is responsible for that? Who said those things? Who thought these things?" It is true that Lent is a time for us to look honestly at ourselves and admit the things we do that are wrong so that we can live better lives going forward, but God does not pull out his heavenly ledger book and grill us according to our transgressions. During Lent, we do not need to even think about having to say, "Not me!"

Instead, Lent is all about our standing before God and saying, "It's me, Lord. It's me! Notice me! Listen to me! Help me! Guide me! Walk with me!" We all stand before God and, in the words of the spiritual we heard earlier, we say, "It's me, it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer." And to make

certain that we are not trying to play that game of “Not me,” we remind God (and ourselves) that “It’s not my brother, not my sister, not the preacher (although I can’t say that!), not the teacher, not my father or my mother or the stranger or my neighbor, but it’s me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.”

We enjoyed having Dr. Luke Powery with us a few weeks ago as he reminded us how spirituals can help us in our faith journey. He shared with us a poem by Howard Thurman, one of the outstanding and influential ministers of the Twentieth Century. In that poem, Dr. Thurman said,

How good it is to center down!
To sit quietly and see one’s self pass by!
...
We look at ourselves in this waiting moment—
the kinds of people we are.
The questions persist: what are we doing with our lives?—
what are the motives that order our days?
What is the end of our doings? Where are we trying to go?
Where do we put the emphasis
and where are our values focused?
For what end do we make sacrifices?
Where is my treasure and what do I love most in life?
What do I hate most in life and to what am I true?¹

We cannot answer, “Not me!” to those kinds of questions. They require a different kind of answer. When we examine our lives, we can only say, “It’s me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.” It’s me—not someone else. This is my time to commune with God. This is my time to ask God some questions. This is my time to answer those questions God asks of me.

Ash Wednesday is a point of beginning. It marks not only the beginning of the season of Lent but it also reminds us of our own beginning. Tonight we are all marked by ashes, by the dust that remains when palm branches are burned. We are reminded that it is from dust that we are created and it is to dust that we will one day return. That can be a sobering and even depressing thought, but it can also be a joyful realization. Look at yourself and the people around you! Isn’t it amazing what God can do with a few pounds of dust! Pinch yourself and feel the aliveness of your body. Breathe deeply and draw

¹Howard Thurman, “How Good To Center Down,” in *Meditations of the Heart*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1953, 1981 by Anne Thurman), No. 9, pp. 37-39.

in the air that was once in the lungs of God! Sit quietly for a moment and listen to the rhythm of your own heart powering the most amazing machine the world has ever known. Yes, we are made from dust and will one day return to that same form, but in the meantime we are wonderful creations given life by God. It's me, O Lord! It's me!

True, there is a somber side to Lent as we contemplate the ways in which we have not measured up to God's wonderful gift of life to us. But there is also a joyful side to Lent as we begin to discover more of who we are and what God still has in store for us. We take this time during Lent to look at ourselves so that we can be better and enjoy more of God's blessings for us. Lent is not a time to beat up on ourselves; it is an opportunity to celebrate who God created us to be and to fully become that person.

Throughout this season we will be thinking about "My Heart as Sanctuary, My Life as Prayer." This theme simply points us to the truth that the true altar of our lives is our hearts for that is where we are most honest with ourselves. What we do in life emerges from that same place. So, if we will spend some time examining our hearts we will likely live better in the world. The prayers that we make in our inmost being will be the prayers we live day by day.

Jesus talked about ways in which we can make certain that we are tending to our faith and not to the world's opinion of us. He reminds us to be generous in our benevolence but to do so quietly and without fanfare. He urges us to pray, but to do so in private so as not to seek the accolades of others who might overhear us. He encourages us to fast and try other spiritual disciplines that might enhance our faith but to do so joyfully and without drawing attention to ourselves. Jesus reminds his followers—including us—that our true faith will be found wherever we place our greatest value. If our treasure is ordinarily seen as fame or reputation or money or position or power or some other human achievement, that treasure will itself be our reward. If, however, we value our relationships with one another and with God, if we hold our neighbor in high regard and treat one another with love and respect, then our reward will be a heart that is overflowing with goodness and mercy.

It is not lost on any of us that today—Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent—is also Valentine's Day. Both occasions are opportunities to express one's love for the special people in his or her life. I would remind you that

Jesus' coming to live among us and sharing with us the Gospel is the greatest gift of love we could ever give—or share with someone else.

It's me, it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer and mercy and forgiveness, and blessing, and happiness, and joy. It's me, O Lord, standing in need of your grace and eager to receive it so that I can share it with others. Amen.