

Ash Wednesday

March 2, 2022; Year C

The Episcopal Church of the Atonement

The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud

*Joel 2:1-2,12-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6,16-21; Psalm 103 or 103:8-14*

Last night, I was browsing Facebook instead of doing the laundry or washing the dishes or writing this sermon. And I am glad that I was, because the husband of one of my clergy colleagues was quoted. He said, “Here’s your Ash Wednesday sermon: It’s Lent. Repent. Amen.”

My friend admitted she was tempted. I’m guessing that I am not the only one of her Facebook friends who will at least quote this: “It’s Lent. Repent.” That, of course, presupposes that we think that we have some sins to repent for.

Twenty-five years ago this winter, I took my first class in seminary. I was at the very beginning of what turned out to be an 8 year discernment on the part of me and the church as to whether I was called to be ordained a priest. Just take one class, said my husband. It will help you figure out some things. And so I did. There was no Episcopal seminary in Philadelphia, but the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia welcomed Episcopal students. So, I enrolled in *Introduction to Liturgy*. One of the first things the professor told us was that he expected us to attend chapel daily. His reasoning was sound—if we were going to lead liturgy one day, we should be in the habit of participating in liturgy. Throughout my six years at LTSP, I made it my practice to attend chapel whenever I was on campus—so not every day—but a lot of days.

And the first time I attended a service of Eucharist at the seminary, the presider, who happened to be my Liturgy professor, stood up to lead the Confession, “We confess that we are in bondage to sin,” we began. And I thought “In bondage to sin? Me?”

Later, I spoke to some of my classmates about it, and they hadn’t heard anything weird at all! That was just how the Confession began. One of them, who knew a little bit about *The Book of Common Prayer* reminded me that I had grown up praying about my “manifold sins and wickedness.” What’s a little bondage compared to all that wickedness? he wondered.

It may have been the first time that I realized how the lovely familiar words of the liturgy may sound to those who are hearing them for the first time. All of which is to say, it’s Lent! We are going to talk a lot about sin and repentance this season. For some of you, it will sound really normal. And for some of you, it may sound like we are really concentrating on sin. But don’t be afraid. And don’t give up hope. Because we know something on this cold winter Wednesday—we know this: Sunday’s coming!

On the third day, Scripture tells us, on a bright Sunday morning, the women went to the tomb to dress the body of their dead teacher. And the tomb was empty. Jesus broke the bonds of sin and death. And all these years later, we gather, Sunday by Sunday, and sometimes on a random Wednesday, and sometimes, at a teacher’s advice—everyday, we

gather and confess that we are in bondage to sin—but then we proclaim that Jesus has broken the bonds of sin and death for all time.

All of which makes today a really good day to ask the question, “what is sin?” We are going to talk about it all season, so what is it? *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin.* That is St. Paul in our second reading today, explaining the reconciling work of Jesus. God sent Jesus to become one of us—*made him to be sin who knew no sin.*

How could there be anything that God does not know about? How could God *NOT* know sin? What is the one thing that God cannot, ever understand? It seems to me that the only thing that God cannot know is this: life without God. That is the definition of sin. Sin is the absence of God. Sin is being apart from God. Sin is not knowing God. And the only way that God could know what it is like to be apart from God’s self is for God to become one of us. *For our sake God made Jesus to be sin.*

God is love. All love comes from God. God knows nothing apart from God’s love. And, casting about for the very best way to show us that God loves us, God became one of us. And in becoming one of us, God experienced something that each one of us has experienced from time to time. Jesus, the baby, the child, the man—Jesus experienced what it was like to be so far away from God that he could not feel God’s love—he could not discern God’s presence. *He made him to be sin.*

Now there are lots of reasons for sin like this—there are lots of ways that we can separate ourselves from God’s love. Inattention will do it—if we are so distracted by our own selves or others we can forget that everything we have comes from God. Fear can do it too. Anxiety can overwhelm us and make it hard to trust in God’s love and care for us. Love of power, or wealth, or intellect can get in our way, too. If we remember and honor the God of everything, then we have to acknowledge that God has the power; God has the glory; God has the knowledge.

But there is something worse, an even worse sin, if anything can be worse than being apart from God: there are ways that we try to separate *others* from God’s love. If we make the mistake of thinking that our spiritual lives are made better by following a list of rules, then we can pretty quickly think that those who don’t follow our rules don’t belong. And then we forget that the goodness of God is inherent in every single one of God’s beloved children. Every human person was born in the image and likeness of God. And God found us so lovely and loveable that God became one of us. How dare we try to exclude others from the love that God pours over creation?

We confess that we are in bondage to sin, but Sunday is coming! God did not leave us here on our own. God does not leave us separate and apart from God. God is one of us. And when death came to Jesus, God would not let that human fact keep humanity apart from God. Sunday arrived and the tomb was empty. Once and forever, Jesus broke sinful bondage.

The work of Lent is to remember that we cannot do this alone. We live our lives in God's love because God loves us first. We cannot earn it. We cannot work our way into it. But we can accept it. And we can live like we believe it. God loves us because God is love. And God's love breaks the bonds of sin. And so we are reconciled with God.

On this day, we mark ourselves with ashes, a sign of death and mortality. But we don't pour the ashes on our heads. We don't use the ashes like clown make up, big phony tears dirtying our faces. Instead, we trace that spot where once we were marked with the sign of the Cross. At our baptism, we receive the Cross of Christ on the forehead—we are sealed by the Holy Spirit, and marked as Christ's own forever. And today, we will receive a Cross on the same place. We already know that we are Christ's own, forever. And today, we will outline that sign, reminding ourselves that we are human, and that God loves us and draws us to God's self.

Today is Ash Wednesday, but take heart. Sunday is coming.