

Mending what is Broken

Ash Wednesday 2022

Slide: fallen ice cream cone

This last summer, Jim and I walked down to Ramone's ice cream shop to get a special treat on a warm day, and after getting our ice cream, we sat outside on their back patio. A Father and his little toddler son had also just come outside for their ice cream. The little boy was licking his ice cream cone when the giant scoop of ice cream simply plopped onto the hot cement. Of course, this little boy immediately began to cry and said, "Daddy, it's broken! Fix it!" Of course, Daddy couldn't fix it. It was now almost a little puddle on the ground.

Yet, Daddy did exactly what I thought he would do and actually what I also would have done. He cleaned it up and promptly got his little boy a new ice cream cone. As he came back outside with his son, tears abated, smiles back, I said to him with my own smile, "Crisis avoided!" And, he said, "Right? I wish life were this easy to fix!" Hence, this sweet

little boy averted having to live with the loss of his ice cream treat. At least that one broken dream was mended.

Slide: Broken heart

But, we all know that many broken things cannot be fixed. In fact, some things just stay broken, never to be fixed. Here we are on Ash Wednesday 2022. Two Ash Wednesday's ago, we were just hearing about some virus that was killing people in China. We thought it may be here already. We didn't know much about it yet. And now, here we are two Ash Wednesday's later, and the brokenness of our human lives lays bare. None of us have escaped that brokenness, not one.

Masks, no masks, reasons for why we will or won't do things often in our pride, vaccines & conspiracy theories, election lies and controversies, deep polarization, destruction and apathy of the world's resources, geopolitical danger and war in Europe, something the world has not seen for 80 years - not one of us can claim to be immune from the

aftermath of such a time as this. How do we mend when the pieces are scattered everywhere?

At UWEC every year, Ash Wednesday is the most attended worship service of the year for students. Once when asking a now former student there why Ash Wednesday was so valuable to them they indicated that it was the one time of year that they felt was spiritually authentic to them, a time to admit that they were broken but that it was ok to admit it. And, leaving that worship with the ashy forehead, mortality imposed and reminded of a sinful condition they are captive to, they felt a deep physical connection to a faith they can't always articulate. "I don't have to hide my brokenness on that day," he said.

Slide: Ashes and Palms

The discomfort of Ash Wednesday is also a strange relief to Christians who practice their faith. We come because we know we are broken. We cannot mend without God's help. And, we cannot begin to

help mend the world from its brokenness without God's help. This day, ashes of mortality reminded and imposed upon us, feels like a necessity, so that we can yet again begin to mend. So, here we are on the most uncomfortable day of the church year, and God bless you for taking the risk to be uncomfortable today. It is not a comfortable thing to do to admit that you are broken, to sit with it and admit it, that you need God, and that God calls us always to turn back and return to the goodness God promises us.

Fixed in my memory to this very day, was the first time I placed an ashen cross on a little girl who was barely three years old. I can remember choking on the words, "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return." While as it did not seem uncomfortable for the three year old at the time, who felt completely included in a ritual that she did not yet understand, the reminder of my own mortality and brokenness up and against such an innocent one. I can even remember thinking, "Do I

have to admit that this three - year old is sinful and will die?" She is only three. Must we focus on that possibility? And yet, already children have died in Ukraine. Already children have perished because of disease and accidents, so the answer is yes.

Ash Wednesday, therefore, if it begins our Lenten discipline correctly, does distress as much as it comforts, because it rubs our faces in our mortality, our inattention to the neighbor, our self-serving excuses and our tendency to expect others to fix things for us. Death and sin, sin and death: The real issue is not that we are all going to die biologically speaking, but it's about the death we bring on ourselves because we forget that we are created in God's image, beloved, treasured but that also so is everyone else.

Ash Wednesday also makes us view our capabilities realistically. Left to our own resources, we can no more give up our self-will and need to speak for God, pretending to be self-sufficient when we really are not. I can't tell you how

many times I have attempted to have control over things that happen, as if a tight control over what I can't control will fix what is broken. It does not and cannot. The ashes traced upon my forehead and yours remind all of us that when left to our own devices, we find we cannot be God, as much as we may try to be.

Ash Wednesday is no doubt more uncomfortable because of the act that is central to it which is repentance, repentance being our admitting that we fall short of God's glory. We are out of relationship with God and when we are not in right relationship that is called sin. In saying that out loud, we repent; that is, we turn back to the God who longs to be in relationship with us.

Slide: 8th grade class

A week ago, the 8th grade confirmation class talked about confession and this day. We talked about our brokenness and about how God helps mend us. One way we begin to be mended is that we admit what we have done and confess

that to God. I asked them to think of a time when they did something they knew was wrong but had not been caught yet. I asked them to conjure up that time – how did it feel that you knew instinctively that it was wrong but you had not yet been found out? What did your body feel like when you thought about it? Were your hands clammy? Were you afraid or nervous, upset at what you did or trying even harder to hide it?

Then, I asked them to write it down on a piece of paper. I put all the papers in a paint can and lit the papers on fire. I mentioned that we are all broken and God begins to mend us when we confess we need God and need a reminder of our beloved image. God remembers these sins no more as if they have been burned and destroyed forever. From the ashes, mending what is broken can begin again.

Slide: mending broken hearts

Today we are broken. Perhaps we think we are more broken than ever, but actually, we have always been whether

we admit it or not. We also will be broken tomorrow whether we admit it or not. But, we also are blessed, blessed yesterday, today and tomorrow. We are given light from Christ because of his Easter promise even on a day like today. This day is a strange combination of both. God calls us to life, this life, broken and muddled as we are. We are called to be who we were created to be. Knowing that, perhaps we can come to admit authentically that we, all of us, are broken, and need God to mend us again. Therefore, mend us, O God, and let this dust live.

Amen.