

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17
Psalm 51:1-17
2 Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

This is an uncomfortable day. It is uncomfortable because of the feelings that we have – and perhaps the feelings that we think we should be having. There are Ash Wednesdays when each of us may feel as remorseful and ashamed as the words of *Psalm 51* seem to require. “Wash me through and through from my wickedness” (*Ps. 51:2*). These are words that sound like a sinner who means them. There are also Ash Wednesdays when it may be much harder for each of us to connect with that “feeling” of remorse. We say the words, receive our ashes and are reminded of our mortality and brokenness. But we may not feel as horrible as it seems like we should.

But today is not about a search for a feeling. We are not here to feel appropriately shameful or self-hating. We are gathered here as a community to search for the rest of ourselves. To bring our whole selves into our relationship with God. We need a day set aside to do that because we're so bad at seeing ourselves truthfully; it's so easy for us to live with secrets. I don't mean secrets from God, since God knows everything that we do and hears our most intimate thoughts. I mean the secrets we keep from ourselves. Of course, we know what God's word says. And we know

what feel and do. When many of us think of ourselves, we picture the good parts – the ways that we are trying to live a faithful life with God. When others of us think of ourselves, we only think of the awful parts, forgetting that we are God’s beloved creations and children. Both types of people remain blind to the ways that our lives are not honoring the way of life that God envisions for his family.

We fall into a long tradition of humans who are the same way. In the Hebrew scriptures, David was anointed as the long-awaited king that would shepherd and rule Israel. King David – the musician shepherd and mighty warrior in battle! King David who committed adultery with Bathsheba and then secretly plotted for her husband, Uriah the Hittite’s, to be killed. It is this great King David who needed the Lord’s prophet, Nathan, to hold a mirror before him. To show David what he had done and how that fell short. At some point along years of Jewish faith, our Psalm 51 was understood and prayed as the Psalm of David in repentance. “Have mercy on me, O God... blot out my offenses... cleanse me from my sin.”

(Ps. 51:1-3)



What is the point of seeing ourselves as if before a mirror? It is not to encourage shame and self-hatred, or to inspire practices of self-denial. It is not to feel bad, though that may happen. Our relationship with God does not require a manufactured affect, but it does involve all of our selves. Just like the chosen women and men of the past, God calls us to bring our

whole selves and return to him. We can not leave behind the parts of us which we keep as secrets from ourselves. When we are honest with ourselves, we can no longer pretend that we are living fully as God wants us to live. The prophet Joel articulates God's desire for us to look in the mirror and acknowledge the tarnished images that we see.

Yes, this is an uncomfortable day. It is hard to face the honest images of our brokenness. Perhaps it's even more painful to intentionally acknowledge that brokenness – which feels like a secret – before someone else. We do not go through this merely to appear weak in the face of an egotistic God who needs to be reminded how holy or perfect God is. We are taking a step toward re-engaging in our relationship with God through an exercise of truth and honesty. We are seeking an end to the secrets with which we protect our distorted self-images. Secrets that ultimately prevent us from being able to really believe God's overwhelming mercy and love for us. Secrets that prevent us from being able to offer our whole selves in witness and service to the world around us. Honesty with ourselves breaks through the paralysis of shame. Honesty is the first step toward being able to love God & others.



The psalmist prays to God...

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 made 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.

This prayer is not one of a person paralyzed by internalized guilt or shame, but one that actively seeks God's wisdom, help and healing. We are naming the brokenness which we know is in our hearts – in hope that God may make us clean and whole. In hope that our broken bones and hearts may be stitched together and dance with joy! The promise of the word is that God's mercy can and will bring about transformation of our very beings. Our lungs may be filled with the new life that God only breathes into the world. But first we need to see and admit that we need to be healed. Again, the psalmist sings...

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 me to the joy of your salvation,
and sustain me in a willing spirit.

Our prayers and rituals today are ultimately words and actions that seek renewal in our lives. As baptized children, we are re-committing and re-engaging in our relationship with God. We are seeing ourselves and speaking that truth before God, so that we may be freed from the disillusionment that limits us. So that we may be liberated from the spiritual powers that control parts of our hearts and our lives. In a few

moments, we will pray a long litany of confession to God for our broken ways. Instead of searching for that guilty feeling, I invite you to consider: from what does my heart most long to be freed? We bring that desire, that longing, for healing to God in these forty days. We return to our God as disciples, seeking for our hearts and relationships to be renewed.

Let us pray. Lord, amid our brokenness, do not cast us away. Look upon us with your faithful, steadfast love. Clean our hearts and spirits. Free us that we may live our love for you, God, and love and serve our neighbors. Act in us that we may receive your joy, both now and for the ages to come. In the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.