

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on February 26, 2020 (Ash Wednesday)

Welcome to Lent. I am especially delighted you're here this afternoon because few things gladden my heart as much as gathering with those who exhibit a profound yearning to be in deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. And that's what this day, this season, is all about.

One way we do this, as the ash Wednesday liturgy starkly highlights, is by confessing our sins. We do this every Sunday, of course, as part of the General Confession. We look in the mirror and acknowledge those things we have done, and those things we have left undone. We say we're sorry, we promise to do better, and we are absolved of our sins in the name of Jesus. And this cycle of confession, repentance, and the assurance of forgiveness should be, *must* be, a regular part of our spiritual lives. It both holds us accountable and reminds us of God's loving mercy; of God's joy for the one who repents and returns to the Lord.

But today is a makeup mirror kind of day. Rather than a passing glance to check your hair in the hall mirror on the way out the door, today requires a deeper look. Now, and you may find this hard to believe, I don't regularly use a makeup mirror. In fact, the only time I ever see myself in one is when I accidentally, and horrifyingly, glance over at one in a hotel bathroom. I realize some of you are used to this view, but I'm not. And so it's always rather jarring when I look over and come face-to-face with that magnified, hyper close-up image staring back at me. I'm always shocked to see all those blemishes in high definition, and I quickly avert my eyes.

But in order to authentically take stock of our lives, we must face, rather than avoid, reality. We must gaze deeply into that makeup mirror. So deeply that it reveals the secret desires and intentions of our heart. And it's not always a pleasant view! The reality is that we are sinful beings. We are here on this day, as we prayed at the start of this service, to "lament our sins" and "acknowledge our wretchedness." That's hard language. But it does shake us out of the complacency of confession that often marks our words on Sunday morning. It helps to both pierce and open our hearts.

On Sundays one of the priests says, "Let us confess our sins against God and our neighbor." Jack and I usually leave at least a few moments of silence before launching into the confession. "Most merciful God..." But if you're really struggling with something you've done or left undone, those few moments aren't really enough space in which to fully reflect and repent. Before you know it, we've confessed, been absolved, moved on the Peace, and suddenly someone's trying to shake your hand while you're still trying to acknowledge your wretchedness.

Ash Wednesday spreads this out. In many ways it's an extended version of that brief silence between the bidding of the confession and the confession itself. And I encourage you to embrace it. To spend the time to lament and acknowledge that which stands between you and God. That's what sin is, after all. It's that which separates you from the love of God.

And God wants to remove any barriers, anything that keeps you at a distance. God wants you within reach, not at arm's length. Which is why confessing our sins, removing those obstacles, brings us into deeper relationship with the risen Christ. And it's precisely why I don't think you can talk about sin without talking about love.

That sounds counterintuitive, I know. But Lent in general, and Ash Wednesday in particular, isn't merely a time set aside to feel bad about ourselves. We may all be "miserable offenders" with "no health in us" as the old confession from the 1928 Prayer Book put it. But that's not our full identity. We are beloved children of God who, out of shame or fear, fall away and turn away and run away from God's deep and abiding love for us. In a word, we are human. And God loves us anyway. Deeply and unconditionally.

In a few moments, you will be invited, in the name of the Church, into the observance of a "holy Lent." And I think it's helpful to reflect upon what this means. And to remember that, popular misconceptions aside, we are not invited to keep a miserable Lent or a guilt-ridden Lent or a gloomy Lent or even a wretched Lent, but a *holy* Lent. And holy simply means "set apart for God." You, in all your imperfections, have been set apart for God. Because God loves you. And in the same way, we are invited to set apart some *time* for God. Through prayer, worship, reading, whatever your particular Lenten devotion may be. Whatever allows you to set apart some time to spend with God.

One of the ways I'll be practicing what I preach this Lent is by spending some extended time reflecting on the words of Morning Prayer. I've been praying the daily office for years and so the words are very familiar. But I often hear them without really and deeply praying them. That's the danger of liturgy. It anchors our lives, it is comforting, but sometimes the words become too familiar and we need to listen as if hearing them for the first time.

But one of the canticles I say every week speaks to the nature of sin and repentance in a beautiful way and I'm going to invite you into a section of it. Feel free to close your eyes if that helps.

"In your great goodness, Lord, you have promised forgiveness to sinners, that they may repent of their sin and be saved. And now, O Lord, I bend the knee of my heart, and make my appeal, sure of your gracious goodness. I have sinned, O Lord, I have sinned, and I know my wickedness only too well. Therefore I make this prayer to you: Forgive me, Lord, forgive me. Do not let me perish in my sin, nor condemn me to the depths of the earth. For you, O Lord, are the God of those who repent, and in me you will show forth your goodness. Unworthy as I am, you will save me, in accordance with your great mercy, and I will praise you without ceasing all the days of my life."

As you enter into this holy season, I invite you to "bend the knee of your heart." To acknowledge not just your sinfulness, but God's loving grace. These ashes aren't just a reminder of your own mortality, but a sign of God's abundant and abiding love for you. Remember that you are dust, yes, but remember also that you are God's beloved child. That Jesus rejoices at your presence this day; forgives you when you humbly repent of your sinfulness; and seeks after you in goodness and mercy all the days of your life.