

Ash Wednesday Sermon
The Rev. Megan Dembi

Today is Ash Wednesday, which marks the beginning of the season of Lent, a time for us to prepare ourselves for the days of Christ's passion and resurrection through penitence and fasting. Yet many of us misunderstand the true purpose of Lent. It's easy to think that Lent is a time to beat ourselves up and remind ourselves how terrible we are. It's easy to think that we're properly observing Lent by giving up chocolate or some other luxury, without having any real reason for doing it. It's easy for us to show up to church on Ash Wednesday, and then never really consider the point of Lent before celebrating Easter. It's easy for us to go through Lent year after year without ever really understanding why we observe Lent in the first place.

The season of Lent calls us to penitence and repentance. The acts of penitence and repentance require that we acknowledge our wrongdoings, show remorse for our wrong doings, turn away from our wrongdoings, and turn towards God. The goal of penitence is not to think that we are terrible people and to beat ourselves up. It's to take a very hard, realistic look at our lives, to not gloss over our sins, to not gloss over those things which we ought not to have done or those things we failed to do. Penitence means acknowledging to ourselves what aspects of our lives need to be improved in order live more in line with how we believe God would have us live. And, yes, when we truly think about our sins, we'll probably feel bad. But that is not the main goal of penitence. The main goal is to find those things in our lives that we need to change in order to draw closer to God. We're not penitent because God will hate us if we are not. As our collect pointed out, God hates nothing he has made. We are penitent so that we can then be repentant, so that after we identify our sins, we can turn away from them, and turn instead to the path that God would have us walk. We are to repent and turn away from those things that cause us to sin, and turn towards those things that strengthen our faith and draw us closer to God.

We may be tempted to think that we must be penitent and repentant in order to earn our forgiveness from God. But the season of Lent is not about earning our forgiveness—because we can't earn our forgiveness. That is why Christ had to come into the world. The purpose of Lent and its call to penitence and repentance is about learning how to properly RESPOND to the reality that we have been forgiven. However, we're not to just supposed to be forgiven and then live our lives however we'd like, no matter how sinful we might be. As Christians we are meant to transform our lives in response to the forgiveness and grace that God has given to us.

Lent is difficult. And it's not just difficult because we have to think about our sins and our failures and then figure out how we need to change our lives. It's difficult because no one can tell us exactly what it is we need to do in order to faithfully observe Lent. Because what we need to do during Lent is extremely personal. It takes a lot of self-reflection and willingness to be honest with ourselves about our sins and what we need to do to show penitence and be repentant. We can pray, we can fast, we can deny ourselves certain luxuries or bad habits, and we can read scripture and meditate on it. But the specifics of how we can engage in these various activities to help us repent and turn to God will be different for everyone. In the Gospel reading, Jesus talks about the importance of personal faith. Of giving, praying, and fasting in secret.

Even deciding what to do with the Ashes on our foreheads after this service is over requires personal reflection. What are our motivations for wanting to keep the cross on all day, or wanting to wipe it away immediately after the service is over. Did we only come to this Ash Wednesday service so people will see the ashes on our forehead and think you're a good Christian? If that's the case, then yes, do what Jesus commanded in the Gospel and keep this service personal—make your prayers here today secret. When you leave here, wipe the cross off of your forehead. There's no requirement to keep the cross until it naturally fades away. However, if we tend to be embarrassed about your faith and are unwilling to share Christ with others due to a feeling of shame, then we should keep the cross on our

forehead. The point is to confront those aspects of our lives that are in need of improvement, and do what is necessary to fix them. Jesus did not just say, "Beware of practicing your piety before others." He said, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them." We must discern our own motivations for what we are doing. And only we ourselves and God can truly know our motivations.

During Lent the goal is not to suddenly become a perfect person. Because that is an impossible goal to accomplish over a lifetime, let alone in 40 days. But the goal is to acknowledge our sins, our shortcomings, so that we can see the right path clearly, and turn on to it, and begin following it. Lent is the time of the liturgical year where we intently examine the roadmap of our lives, to see where we are heading vs. where we are intending to go. It is a time for us to be penitent, but then repentant. To renew our faith and draw closer to God. Let us enter fully into this season of self-examination. Let us see our sins clearly. Let us identify what it is we need to refrain from or begin doing in order to turn away from our sin. And let us discover what we can do to strengthen our relationship with God, not only during this season of Lent, but over the course of our entire lives.