

## Love, Ash Wednesday, and Living Into Lent

Dear Friends in Christ,

I was raised Episcopalian and, as a youth, I loved Ash Wednesday. What could be cooler than having a huge black cross smeared on your forehead? If I thought the priest hadn't done a decent job, I'd touch it up, while looking in a mirror to make it more emphatic. Of course the thing it stood for -- the universe of conviction, grace, repentance and amendment of life -- was completely foreign to me. Though I had said them nearly every Sunday while growing up, I never really understood those weighty lines in the old general confession at Morning Prayer about "our manifold sins and wickedness" and that "the remembrance of them is grievous unto us; the burden of them is intolerable." I didn't know who they were talking about; through my teenage years and into my early twenties *I felt fine*. The only burden I found intolerable was other people, particularly those who would challenge my pride, or who had the temerity to suggest that I wasn't running my world very well.



Then I fell in love, and I discovered I was utterly incompetent when it came to the part of being in love that involved *actually loving* -- putting the other's needs before my own, wanting the best for them even if it meant sacrifice on my part, and so forth. I couldn't stand hurting her, and yet I seemed to hurt her all the time. The burden of intimacy was intolerable: again and again I wanted to be "free" -- but again and again, I realized that if I acted on that impulse, all the good that I was hoping for, all the good I might become, could disappear in that moment, leaving me aimless and alone.

So I repented, perhaps for the first time in my life. It wasn't a full-throated, genuine, *I'm-sorry-God-please-help-me* kind of repentance. It was actually pretty pathetic and self-centered, as if I were offering God a deal: *God, if you're there, please take the monkey off my back and I promise I won't blame her for anything unless she really deserves it*. It still stuns me to think that the Almighty accepted that as a starting point, but with it He had won a foothold into my soul.

And with that, God began to creep ever more deeply into my mind and imagination. He pried open the crevices of my anger, fear, and self-will, and flooded them with His grace. He worked in my dreams. He called me to reflect upon my own life; and as I did, by degrees He gave me the strength to face the burden of myself, not as I wished I were, but as I was. And yet because I could not separate the reality of my *soul* from the reality of my *sin*, I found the burden intolerable indeed. There were times my sin seemed so bleak, I wondered if I had anything I could call "my soul" at all.

One day, on my way home from work, I stopped in a church where an evening service was just getting under way. There were two young clergy who took turns spinning out some thoughts on Jesus for the group of thirty or so twenty-somethings gathered. I listened. They were both clearly smart and kind, but I didn't really understand a word. Then a hymn number was announced, the organ struck up, and I found myself singing about Jesus, His love, His cross, His endless life:

*My song is love unknown,*

*my savior's love to me:  
love to the loveless shown  
that they might lovely be.  
O who am I,  
that for my sake  
my Lord should take  
frail flesh and die?*

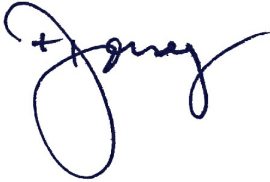
In a moment, and for a moment, I got it: I understood with my mind and my heart God's offer to me -- *if I would give God my sin, God would give me my soul*. So I did. By the end of the hymn, my sense of awe was so great, I could not sing or even speak, silently forming the last words with my lips.

Every Lent, I believe I have a chance to meet that young man again. I have not progressed very far in the Christian life. I still offer God deals all the time, bargains that must strike Him as not much better for either of us than that first offer I made more than forty years ago. But I also know that countless things in me have changed for good over this span of my life, chief among them being my gratitude to Him for not letting me become my worst self, my thanks to Jesus for taking me out of the road that would have led me into deeper darkness, and leading me instead more and more deeply into his heart of love.

And that is how I hope to walk throughout this Lent, letting all my prayer become thanksgiving: my prayers for you all, for this diocese, for the Church, and especially my prayers for the world, giving thanks that God is, in the end, sovereign over all heartbreak, suffering, and injustice, trusting that Christ's Kingdom will come, and asking God only that all my words and my works show forth that Kingdom to the glory of His name.

May you all be wonderfully blessed in this holy season.

Faithfully your bishop,



(The Rt. Rev.) Dorsey W.M. McConnell, D.D.



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