

Ash Wednesday Service “Reconciled, Known, and Loved”

2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10; Matthew 6:1-8, 16-21

Can I know you? Can you know me? Can we *really*, truly, know one another? I have no idea what is going on in your life. I have even less of an idea what is going on in your heart.

Of course, I know some of you, and I know some of you quite well. My wife, Ellie, is here, and my boys. I know them very well.

But.

Even the people I know best — there is no way I can know, just by looking, what is going on inside of them right at this moment.

I could look at each one of you, and try to judge by your body language how you are experiencing this service. But even the picture that you present to me with your visible face and body language, even the 1000 words it paints for me, cannot allow me to really grasp your experience right now.

Isn't this what Paul is saying here?

Paul says, you could look at my appearance, verse 8, and, by the way people treat me and speak about me, you might say that I am an imposter—that I'm inauthentic, fake, a pretender. Some people accused Paul of being fake.

We could ask people (9), “What do you think of this Paul person?” and they might say “What Paul person?”

Paul says, “You look at my body, and it looks like I'm half-dead. You see my chains of imprisonment, and you assume that “prisoner” is what *defines* my existence.

“You see me shed tears, and (10) you figure that I'm always depressed. You look inside my wallet, and you assume that I'm a poor beggar.

“You see others sharing with me, and you might get the idea that I have no possessions.”

And Paul says, “you could think that. But you'd be wrong. Very wrong.”

And Jesus has something to say about appearances, too, doesn't he?

You can look at someone (verse 1) who is in church every Sunday, and even on special days like Ash Wednesday. They know when to stand, sit, and kneel. They're an insider. And you'd think that they're an insider with God.

You see someone giving a donation to a relief agency (2) to help the poor, and you might think “wow, there's someone whose heart has been gripped by what they believe. They're giving *sacrificially*.”

Ash Wednesday Service “Reconciled, Known, and Loved”

2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10; Matthew 6:1-8, 16-21

You hear someone pray (5), maybe in a restaurant, or up in front of the church, and you are so impressed by their words and their manner that you think, “whoa, there’s someone I want to be like. They’re truly spiritual. If only I could be like that.”

During Lent, maybe (16), you meet someone who isn’t just giving up chocolate or Netflix or Facebook, but is actually giving up *food*. And you think, “Um, that’s a little extreme. But I guess if you’re a really spiritual person, you’re going to do some extreme things from time to time!”

I don’t know why you’re here this evening. I don’t know what’s going on in your heart and life that makes you think, “you know what? I’m going to observe Lent. I’m going to get ashes put on my forehead—a symbol of death—ashes in the shape of a cross, which is, of course, an execution machine.”

Do *you* know why you’re here? What you’re doing?

Do *I* know what *I* want out of Lent, out of these ashes, out of this our communion meal, out of our experience together, out of my practices and rituals this season?

You know what? In a sense, you don’t know what you’re doing or what you want. And neither do I. We are not just a mystery to one another. We don’t just have problems taking the picture we see of each other and turn it into 1000 true words about one another.

We’re also a deep and profound (and sometimes deeply disturbing) mystery to ourselves!

Saint Augustine said “I am a profound mystery to myself. A riddle to myself. A great question to myself.”

An Anglican priest named Nelson Koscheski, who just died last March, wrote a Lenten hymn that begins like this:

Our minds are fickle and our wills are flighty,
They flit about like dry petals in the wind.
Feelings chase their tails, they turn and tumble;
Our inmost selves are all undisciplined.

No, we cannot control the will’s affections,
Our hearts are all self-centered, they cannot hold.
We don’t even know what we desire,
Without a cause or goal our lives unfold.

We don’t even know what we desire!

Ash Wednesday Service “Reconciled, Known, and Loved”

2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10; Matthew 6:1-8, 16-21

I can't just stand up here and tell you: For Lent, I want you to get in touch with yourself! I want you to be authentic! I want you to be real! To be your *real* self! No pretending!

You are alienated from yourself! You don't even know how to be reconciled to your true self. You don't even know what you desire.

Paul felt the same way about himself, at times, it seems. Read Romans 7: “I do what I don't want to do, and I don't do what I want to do.” Who am I and what the heck am even I doing?

So what's Paul's solution to our dilemma? He doesn't get up in front of the Corinthian church and tell them to be authentic; to be reconciled to themselves.

What does he say? Look at our lesson, verse 20:

Be reconciled to God. Don't get in touch with yourself first, and then, later, work on those other things: God, Jesus, spirituality. Be reconciled to God!

Verse 2: Now is the day of salvation! This is the right time to move out of your confusion about who you are. Today is a perfect day to stop asking, at least for a moment, how you can become a better version of yourself. This is the right time, instead, to accept the grace of God (1).

Because God looked into the mess of our own confused hearts and our disordered lives, and said (2), “I've been listening to you. Let's have a day of salvation, shall we? Here I am to be your great helper. To recover for you the most fundamental relationship anyone has ever had: a relationship with me. One that is characterized, yes, by mystery. But one that is especially characterized by grace; by the recovery of sanity! ...

“If you'll receive my grace, for the first time or the 1,000th time, I'll do something in the depths of your heart that no one will expect, and that most people won't even see happening.

“However many afflictions, hardships, calamities, and sleepless nights you might experience—right there, where no one can see, you'll grow (4) endurance, you'll find growing in you, by my grace, (6) purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, a set-apart spirit, genuine love, (7) and honest speech.

“Though people might think you're an imposter (8), if you're reconciled to me, you'll never be more authentic;

“Though they think (9) you're losing your life, you'll never be more alive;

“Though people see your tears (10), you'll be more joyful than ever before;

“Though it might look like you're completely poor, you'll gain the entire creation.”

Ash Wednesday Service “Reconciled, Known, and Loved”

2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10; Matthew 6:1-8, 16-21

Friends, when you stop striving to be your true self, and are reconciled to God through the grace of Jesus Christ, Jesus himself says, you actually *do* become authentic, in him! You (3) don't need to *show* anybody your generosity in order to tell yourself you're generous, because it's enough for you to just imitate your Father's generosity and take pleasure in that little secret between the two of you.

In fact, you'll begin to love to share secrets (6) in prayer with your Father, and you'll begin to forget completely whether anyone else thinks your prayers are “authentic.”

You might even give up chocolate or Netflix or Facebook or *food* for Lent. But you simply look forward to the way this “giving up” will give you a chance to delight in the one thing that no one and nothing can steal from you: the delight of your Father in heaven over the simple fact that he made you, loves you, likes you, and is excited about what's going on in the depths of your heart, where, it turns out, by the same grace with which he reconciled you in Christ, is at work, making you like Jesus.

Friends, I don't know, I *can't* know, exactly what's going on inside of you. *You* can't even know it.

But how about this: the One who *does* know exactly what's going on inside of you on Ash Wednesday, 2020, is not only unafraid of what he sees, but is ready to be reconciled to you, to grow a true and authentic person out of you, from the inside out, and is excited about what he sees as he looks ahead to what you are going to become, by his grace.

If you've never truly been reconciled to God in Jesus Christ, there's no day like today.

If you've already begun to experience what Paul and what our Lord Jesus says about the delights and freedoms of a reconciled life in and with God, then there's no day like today to say yes, one more time, to the person God intends—even this Lenten season—to make you, by his grace, and by his dear Son.