

“The Word We Hate The Most”

Message for *Ash Wednesday*

From Pastor Norman Staker

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JOEL 2: 1-2, 12-17 – 2 CORINTHIANS 5: 20B-6:10

MATTHEW 6: 1-6, 16-21



GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE WENT TO THE CROSS FOR US BUT NOW, HE IS RISEN; HE IS RISEN INDEED!

Before we get into the meat and potatoes of my message, I want to let you know what its title is: “The Word We Hate the Most.” Maybe you already know the answer; maybe not, but think about it. The Word We Hate the Most!

Our text tonight opens with these words: “Jesus said to the disciples: Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.”

Something has always bothered me about Ash Wednesday. What exactly is ‘Ash Wednesday?’ Where does it come from? It’s definitely not in the Bible. You can scour every page of scripture but you won’t find the two words ‘ash’ and ‘Wednesday’ together. But some of its ideas are.

Here we are, at the start of another Lenten journey, a journey of 40 days, leading up to the most horrendous form of execution ever devised by man but used specifically on the Son of Man, Jesus Christ himself. We’re talking about the cross of course.

Before we go any further and we will during this season of Lent, let me ask you: What kind of love would choose the cross when it had every power to walk away? We are reminded in Isaiah that it wasn't nails that held Jesus to the cross, but redeeming, deliberate, sacrificial love. Jesus Christ did not endure suffering because He was trapped, but because He willingly chose to give Himself for us. He took our place. On a day when the world often speaks of love sentimentally as we did this past Saturday, Valentine's Day, we need to be reminded of the love of God – the kind of love that rescues, redeems, and saves.

Every year we read the same lessons from our Bible: Joel 2, Psalm 51, 2 Corinthians 5 and Matthew 6. Matthew 6 instructs us to 'Beware of practicing your piety before others.' Sometimes pastors will expound on this text which they would if they use the Gospel as the basis for their message and will talk about the importance of our faith being lived out in our deeds, not in simple signs that draw attention to ourselves. Then we adorn ourselves with a symbol, a cross of ashes on our foreheads, sometimes on the hands, and then we go out into the world for all to see. That's not practicing your piety.

It almost seems a little hypocritical. In many modern churches, we tend to accommodate people's daily schedules by worshiping in the evening, like we do here, so most of us then simply go home afterward, rather than parading around town all day with a cross on our foreheads. But still, and yet...

Ash Wednesday has its origins in the early Christian Church – somewhere between the sixth and eighth centuries. Originally, the idea was that a Christian, as a sign of repentance, would sprinkle ashes on his or her head.

Where did this idea come from? In the Bible, ashes were always associated with humility and mortality, fasting and remorse. If you had sinned against God, and you felt remorse about that

sin, and you were repenting of that sin, then sometimes, in the Bible, you would sprinkle ashes on your head as a sign of sorrow and repentance. Ashes were supposed to remind you that you were mortal, that you will eventually become ashes after you die. We're only ashes, and we need to repent of our sins now while God gives us a time of grace.

All other reasoning aside, what's important is not whether you have ashes on your forehead; what's important is what's going on in your heart; what's going on in your soul.

We keep a lot about ourselves hidden. We have secret thoughts, secret desires, secret feelings. We have a lot to keep hidden. We hide things from one another because we're ashamed of what's inside of us.

Others may think we have a pure heart, but we know that impure thoughts have often entered our heart. Others may think we are unselfish, but we know how much selfishness remains within us. Others may think we are strong and courageous, but we know how weak and afraid we really are.

I don't believe we ever come to know anyone completely. You can experience every possible intimacy with someone, you can live with someone through the passage of years, you can share great joys and great sorrows with someone, and you will still not know everything about them. People will still surprise and sometimes shock you. There is an inner part of people we never see. There is a hidden part of ourselves we never reveal.

In today's Scripture from Matthew's Gospel Jesus directs our attention to our hidden life. He draws the contrast between our outward appearance to others and our inner spiritual reality.

Jesus tells us that we can easily become caught in the contradiction of audiences. On the outside we can appear to be seeking God, or trying to do what's right; but on the inside we can be preoccupied with making a certain impression on other people. It's not God's approval we're seeking, but the applause of others.

For every Christian, ashes or not, Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the somber season of Lent. Lent is a forty day span of time from now until Easter. During this time, we focus on Christ's battle with sin and Satan that he waged in order to win for us our salvation. The 40 days of Lent do not include Sundays, because each Sunday is considered a "miniature Easter," a time of joy and celebration of Christ's resurrection. During Lent, though, even on Sundays, we will be talking about the battles that Christ fought for us on our behalf.

Why 40 days? Right after Jesus was baptized, the Bible tells us that Jesus went out into the desert to fast and to be tempted by the Devil for 40 days. For Jesus, those 40 days were a time of introspection, a time when he battled the temptations of the Devil and emerged stronger than he had been before. For us, Lent is a time when we make that journey with Christ. We think about OUR temptations, our sins, and we repent. Take note of the color purple we are using today, a color always associated with repentance in the Christian church. After these 40 days, we emerge stronger than we had been before.

Lent is a time to evaluate yourself in light of God's Word. It's a time to abandon the sins you have grown accustomed to committing in your life. It's a time to receive God's forgiveness and strength to lead a Christian life. It's a time to renew your desire to serve God, and to be the Christians that God has made you to be.

If you were to count all the sins you have committed in just one week - and remember, sins include not just your deeds, but your thoughts. Sins include not just the things you do, but the things you don't do, but should. If you were to count all these sins, your offenses would be many. Thousands, millions of sins, testifying against you in God's court of law.

“Our offenses are ever with us. We acknowledge our iniquities” – there you see a key phrase as we think about Lent this evening. Lent is a time when you look at yourself, and acknowledge that there are some things that need to be fixed up. There are some things about me that are not perfect, things that need to be changed, things that need to be adjusted. My attitudes. My lifestyle.

Are these sins you have committed in your life? Take a close look at yourself, and ask yourself some hard questions – what are my sins? Where am I “not so Christian” in my life? What kind of person am I? Am I really loving? Do I show that in my words and actions? Am I really patient? Do I really love God more than anything else in my life? Do I make sacrifices for him? Am I peaceful? Or, do I like to fight, to assert my will over other people? What kind of person am I? What are my weaknesses? What are my sins? Where do I need to get better in my life?

That is the first part of repentance, the first part of Lent. To look at yourself and to recognize your sins. And then comes the second - to look away from yourself, and to Christ. Before Jesus became a man, he looked out over the world and saw all our sin, and he was appalled at what he saw. And what appalled Jesus the most, was that there was no one to intervene, no one to rescue the human race from its sins.

I think there’s a tendency to think that we should be extremely sober and penitent during the season of Lent. But our reading today from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount would suggest otherwise:

“When you fast, don’t look dismal, like the hypocrites. They disfigure their faces so as to show others that they’re fasting.”

Jesus instructs us, "When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face so that your fasting won't be seen by others, but only your Father in heaven."

Jesus' words here, spoken in the context of Ash Wednesday, suggest that this season isn't meant to be one filled with artificial somberness or pained lament.

No, these acts are meant to stir up faith, to kindle something new within.

Ash Wednesday calls us to remember our mortality. We are finite creatures! Our days are numbered. One day, we all will die.

Jim Valvano, the coach of the North Carolina State University's 1983 NCAA basketball champions, was known for his up-front, cards-on-the-table attitude. When he quit coaching at NC State under a cloud of scandal, instead of seeking some low visibility position, Valvano took a job with ABC and ESPN as a sports announcer. Then, a few years later, he was diagnosed with a virulent, fast-spreading form of cancer. Again, he chose to stay out front. Instead of retreating to the sidelines of life, he kept working - through chemotherapy, hair loss, weight loss, radiation therapy, gray days and good days. Just before he died, he was given the Arthur Ashe Award for Courage. In his acceptance speech, Valvano spoke about how dying of cancer had taught him how to live:

"We should do this every day of our lives," he said. "Number one is laugh. You should laugh every day. Number two is think. You should spend some time in thought. Number three is, you should have your emotions moved to tears. If you laugh, you think, you cry," he said, "that's a full day."

As I close, I'm wondering if you have figured out what is the most hated word in the English language. The word relates directly to Lent.

Give up? The word is "no." We hate the word no, but for Lent we are called to embrace it—to say "no" to those things that keep us from praying, fasting, and giving. To say "no" to being showy and ostentations about praying, fasting, and giving. To say "no" to bragging about our disciplines of praying, fasting, and giving. We can do it...just say "No!"

In Isaiah 53: 4-6: "Surely he has borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows... But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities... and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." That word iniquity is all about our primary problem, sin. Jesus was crucified for our sins, each and every one of us. All nailed with Him to the cross.

"The nails did not hold Jesus there... He stayed because love would not let Him go."

"The cross becomes the place where unseen grief was fully handled by visible love, the love that held the nails."

"Those nails did not hold Him to the cross. Love did. Limitless, deliberate, redeeming love held Him there for me, for you, for the soldier, for the crowd, for the world. And I have never looked at iron the same way again."

If I was preparing a Valentine's Day message, I would look at how the world defines love, by emotion and romance. But tonight, we're talking about love in the cross. Tonight and as we go through Lent to that dastardly thing called the cross, let's put aside our feelings on surface level affection and look deeper into a love that bore our grief, carried our sin, and

refused to step down. There is no greater love to proclaim than the love that held the nails.

May God bless you as you begin your Lenten journey.

Amen.