

"I'm Sorry Are the Hardest Words"

Ash Wednesday, 2023

Luke 18:9-14

Today is the start of the season called Lent, a forty-day journey that leads us to Easter. Lent is a season of self-inspection and fasting. During Lent, we adopt a rather somber attitude of our life and our relationships, and we refrain from certain activities and foods. This time is modelled after Jesus' experience of forty days in the desert.

The Christian Church has been celebrating Ash Wednesday for a surprisingly long time. Using ashes in mourning and sorrow has been around since the first bible stories were recorded. Job, King David, and others all sat around in sack cloth – like the material in potato sacks – and dumped ashes on their heads as an indication of their anguish. In fact, I learned in the early Christian church, people also dumped ashes on each other's heads during Lent. Later, it became more popular (thankfully) to mark a person's forehead with the simple sign of the cross. However, the original intent must not be lost: Ashes are dirty and messy, and they represent our imperfection, our mortality and our grief. After something has been destroyed by fire, ashes are the only thing left to remind us of what was.

It is difficult to look inside ourselves and deal with our imperfection and messiness. Lent is not a popular holiday – everybody likes Fat Tuesday, aka Mardi Gras. But who wants to confess and practice penitence? Not many. "I'm sorry," are the hardest words to say to anyone, let alone say them to God.

In the gospel of Luke, chapter 8, there is a short story about two people who were trying to figure out their lives, the Pharisee and the tax collector. At first glance, the conclusion seems easy. We simply think, "The Pharisee is the bad guy; the tax collector is the good guy. Jesus wants us to be like the tax collector. Got it."

Actually, you probably have more in common with the Pharisee than you know. Yes, Jesus confronted the Pharisees fairly often, and so we think, "Ooh, bad Pharisee." However, Pharisees were very religious. Pharisees worked very hard to please God, like many Christians. They went to "church" (the temple), they read their "bibles" (Hebrew scriptures), they prayed, and they tithed. Pharisees were very zealous about their faith. That's actually why they butted heads with Jesus so much. The Pharisees were so focused on their literal interpretation of the law, they forgot the big picture. Jesus told them, God desires mercy, not sacrifice. (Matthew 9:13 and Hosea 6:6) Don't sell the

Pharisees short, because they have a lot in common with us. However, we can learn from their mistakes.

While tax collectors are elevated in Jesus' story, they were not perfect. In fact, the Roman tax system was probably worse than the modern IRS. In Roman territory, local people bid for the right to collect the taxes. The highest bidder was awarded the job. Essentially, a tax collector was a traitor, someone who went over to the oppressors and said, "I can squeeze the most money out of my people." Of course, they got to keep a little for themselves; actually, a lot for themselves.

I don't know why this particular man became a tax collector. Maybe he had no choice. Maybe his father was a tax collector, and he inherited the job. Whatever the reason, this man knew he was a traitor to his own people. He didn't make excuses before God, like the Pharisee. The only finger he pointed was at himself. The tax collector was so distraught, the scripture says, he wouldn't even look up into heaven. He couldn't look God straight in the face. All this man could say was, "Have mercy on me, a sinner."

The Pharisee never apologized. The tax collector did. And Jesus commended the one who said, "I'm sorry."

I don't know about you, but I feel the weight of my own sin. There is a lot that I regret. I know I cannot stand before the Lord Almighty and say, "Hey, look how perfect I am." No one can.

We all need Lent. We all need Ash Wednesday. We must remind ourselves that our lives are messy, and thankfully, God specializes in messiness. Today is not a fad, nor some cool thing we do in church. It is a serious moment when we can be honest with ourselves and God. These forty days are specifically designed by God to test us, correct us, and move us to the place God wants us to be.

So let us begin the journey of Lent, of self-inspection and awakening, and prepare to return to God's grace. Let us take the time today (tonight) to tell God how sorry we are.

(Enter into a time of prayer and confession.)