

Ash Wednesday, Year A (RCL)
February 26, 2020
New Song Church
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Isaiah 58:1-12
Psalm 103:8-14
II Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Spiritual Reset

I remember clearly the excitement I felt when anticipating going off to college. You may be thinking, well of course that is an exciting transition time in a young person's life – there will be new people to meet, the freedom of setting your own schedule and making your own choices, the stimulation of new courses of study! No more curfew, no more chores, no parent telling you what to do or not to do. And all of that is true, but what really had me excited about going 500 miles away to college was that, with the exception of one high school friend, no one there would know me. No one would have any preconceived notions of what kind of person I was. No one would be there who could remind me of who I used to be – the me I wanted to leave in my rear-view mirror – I could completely reinvent myself! It was a chance to start fresh with people who knew nothing about my painfully awkward teenage years, or the fact that I was a preacher's kid, which carries its own set of unreasonable expectations, or the fact that my father had died a couple of years earlier, leaving a gaping and still painful hole in my heart – no one would know any of that – my life was an empty slate! As a footnote I should add that my plan to reinvent myself didn't work out all that well, it rarely does, but it is sure what I hoped for at the time.

Ash Wednesday/Lent can be a bit like that, though perhaps a bit more realistic – like hitting a reset button with God – time for spiritual do-overs. We assess where we've been, where we are now, where we would like to be, and then make a plan to reinvest in our relationship with God by being more faithful in prayer, more diligent

in our study of scripture, kinder in our interactions with others, less judgmental, and more forgiving.

Like the people of Isaiah's time we earnestly desire a closer relationship with God. So as we enter the season of Lent, we think of things that will help us to focus more intently on nurturing that relationship. Some of us will fast, read, or pray. Some of us will deprive ourselves of a favorite food, like chocolates or desserts, or a favorite past-time, to remind ourselves of Jesus' suffering. Or we may approach Lent with the intention to take up something new, like daily exercise, or meditation.

We don't do these things in the hope that God will love us more – God already loves us – has loved us from before we were born – will love us through our deaths and into that great mystery beyond death. But just as even healthy human relationships can sometimes be strained or feel a bit out of kilter, so can our relationship with God. Strong relationships, whether with people we love or with the God we love, need constant care and intentionality. Sometimes we need to take a step back and reassess that relationship and perhaps hit a reset button by looking for ways in which we can feel even closer to God than we already do.

That closeness and reconciliation is what the people of Isaiah's time longed for as well, only the prophet tells them that however well-intentioned they may be, they are going about it completely wrong and are, in fact, making things worse for themselves and their worshiping community in terms of their relationship with God. Isaiah tells them that God sees through their empty rituals that don't really change their hearts or the lives of those around them.

Look [Isaiah says], you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.

Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.
Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call **this** a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?

Fortunately for them and for us, he doesn't simply tell them what they are doing wrong, but also what they, as a community, can do right both to restore the communal order and to repair their strained relationship with God. What God is calling them to do, Isaiah tells them, is not to fast, but to feed! If you wish be in right relationship with God, he says, feed the hungry! Old Testament professor David Garber, Jr., expands on this contrast: "Instead of calling the people to bind themselves with cords of self-ablation, the prophet calls them to loose the cords of the oppressed, setting them free. Instead of bowing themselves low under the yoke of a self-imposed sense of depravity, the prophet suggests that they break the yoke of the heavily burdened labor class.

As if anticipating the challenge that such lofty goals are impossible to realize in the face of systemic injustice, the prophet gives even more direct and specific instructions in verse 7: share your bread with the hungry, shelter the homeless, clothe the naked, and pay attention to everyone in the community. The practices that create a socially and economically just society are the fast that God desires."ⁱ

The rituals and spiritual disciplines that we start or continue through the season of Lent need not be the empty rituals that Isaiah criticizes in his own community. Fasting, prayer, and meditation are all excellent ways to deepen our feelings of

connection with God or to hit that imaginary reset button. The question is to what end do we engage in these practices? Are they just things to check off of our Lenten list so that we can say we did them and then feel good about ourselves? Or are they practices that we hope will change us, that will break open our hearts, that will free us to show our love for God by focusing that love on our fellow human beings, especially those who need it most – the hungry, those in prison, the homeless, the poor. God calls us to be reconciled, both to God and to one another, not just this Lenten season, but as an act of constant renewal.

Reconciliation can be a tricky term, because to be reconciled to someone, we generally think that we need to have had a right relationship in the first place. But that isn't always the case. Listen to what Jennifer Harvey says about reconciliation in her book, *Dear White Christians*:

"Reconciliation is not a return to a unified past, but a transformation of relationships in the future. Reconciliation is not just mutual forgiveness but a mutual commitment to God's justice. Reconciliation does not erase a dark history; true reconciliation wonders how such a history can be told well, reconstructed honestly, and its effects repaired justly."ⁱⁱ

The Season of Lent invites to be attentive to God's call on our lives. We ask ourselves, what does it mean for each of us as individuals for us to be reconciled to God and others? What does it mean for us to take up our cross and follow Jesus? What does it mean for us as Full Circle and New Song faith communities? Let's lean into those questions for the next few weeks and see what we can do to get out there and loose some bonds and break some yokes!

Amen.

ⁱ David G. Garber, Jr. in *Connections*, Year A, Vol. 2, p. 4.

ⁱⁱ Jennifer Harvey, *Dear White Christians*.