

“Lesson One: Be Reconciled to God”

Ash Wednesday

*Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51:1-17; II Corinthians 5:20b-6:10;
Matthew 6:1-6,16-21*

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From the Pulpit

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A meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Ash Wednesday, March 6, 2019, noon and 7:30 p.m., as I begin this sermon series on Luke's Lessons, I dedicate this sermon and the series to my oldest son, Luke Timothy Sitler Ahrens and always to the glory of God!

“Lesson One – Be Reconciled to God”

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51:1-17; II Corinthians 5:20b-6:10;

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Welcome to Ash Wednesday. No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here. We begin a scriptural and preaching journey today that will wind through 40 days of Lent and then Holy Week and bring us to Easter Sunday. It is my deep hope and prayer that you will be in Lenten small groups, daily reflections as you “Break the chains” in Lent, the powerful Music from St. John's Passion on April 15, Friday Fish Fries, and most your daily personal prayers on this wilderness walk through the season. I also hope and pray

you will learn with Rev. Corzine and me as we focus our week to week preaching on “Nine Lessons for Life” found in Luke.

As we begin the preaching and teaching of Luke’s Lessons, I have a confession to make (and this is the day for confessing!): Two of our “Lessons” come from sources other than Luke. Today, we learn from Paul. On Good Friday, we learn from John. So, I invite you walk with us and learn from our brothers in faith who teach us still lessons for life. *“Lesson One: Be Reconciled to God.”*

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable to your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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In Flannery O’Conner’s short story, “*Good Country People*,” we meet Joy-Hulga who believes she is not one of the good country people. She is better than the good country people around her – that is how she sees herself. She looks around and feels superior to all those with whom she shares her rural life. She is more intelligent, more educated than everybody else. Joy-Hulga struggles to live in this farm environment deep in the countryside of the southeastern United States.

But as we come to know her, we see her as more emotionally troubled than those around her. She protects herself from feeling ostracized by criticizing others. After all she is “superior” to everyone else.

Joy-Hulga can't look at herself, her short-coming, her emotional disabilities, her own failings. At one point, she becomes so exasperated with her mother, she yells at her, *“Woman, do you ever look inside? Do you ever look inside and see who you are not?”* The question, coming from the one who is emotionally disabled and is unable to glance any insights into her own soul is seen and felt by all in the story except Joy-Hulga.

Few of us have looked long enough into ourselves to see that what seems to us and to others as normally attractive is actually as graceless as a scarecrow and too often, even as repulsive. We can spot the physical deformities in others. We can even see the failures of others in our families or our workplaces. We can name their blemishes. We even take time and energy to gossip and tell others about the shortcomings of those around us. In so doing, we put them down and can even destroy them with our pettiness. We turn gratitude into griping and joy into judgments. We can't say “thank you” or “job well done” because it gets caught in our throat by the poking and punishment we lay at the feet of others.

We do not look inside and see who we are not.

The X-ray look at others is called “naked truth.” In literature and art, it is called realism. But, to see it in one’s self is not only difficult but often painful. No one wants to “go there.” To see the “naked truth” about ourselves is to see the plain and the ordinary in ourselves. It is to see ourselves as stripped down and exposed to the truth who we are. And this is the path that Lent invites us to take.

The reason Lent is so long is that the path to truth about ourselves is long and snagged with thorns. And at the very end, each of us stand alone before the broken body of Jesus, our savior whose head is torn to shreds by a crown of thorns. The little thorns that catch us are nothing compared to those that tear at him. There he is – all alone with nothing to hold him up. There we are alone – at the foot of the cross looking up at him and inside our souls to see who we are not. If we are not humbled by the way of the cross, if we do not wince when looking on our crucified savior, if we do not take these forty days to “look inward and see who we are not,” then nothing will ever open our eyes to the truth about ourselves and about this journey we are called to as Christians.

In II Corinthians, Paul is calling the early Christians to look inside themselves and see their own conflicts, struggles and

misunderstandings. He pleads with the baptized believers to become reconciled to God. He cries out, *“do not accept the grace of God in vain.... now is your day of salvation!”* I can almost feel his pen on the paper crying out to his sisters and brothers. Please, please, please do not walk away from seeing yourself as God sees you. Do not treat God’s grace in a way that is disgraceful. Step into this moment, step into this day with a confessional heart and open mind.

Be reconciled to God. Here is our first lesson of Lent.

To be reconciled is to “restore a friendly relationship” with someone. To be reconciled is to bring harmony into a relationship. To be reconciled with God is to receive God’s grace and accept God’s love as a gift. To reach this point of reconciliation begins with living into the essence of life and faith – *“to love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.”*

To reach such a fullness of love has to begin with a cleansing. It starts with naked truth about ourselves. **So, let such honesty and truth-telling begin today.** Let us begin with repentance. You and I need to repent of the lovelessness, the pettiness, the gossip, the unkindnesses, the jealousies, the lies, the half-truths, the heartaches that we cause others, the judgements and the hurts we bring to others and to ourselves. To love God with

everything within us, we begin by “looking inside and seeing who we are not.”

To be reconciled to God begins with real confession and true repentance. What better day and time to start than now. With Jesus Christ as our guide and our savior, we have a real model for what true love looks like. True love is complete, unconditional, selfless, kind, open, welcoming, extravagant, embracing of hardship and suffering as a way to healing and hope. True love never inflicts suffering on others. It holds the other sacred and beautiful. It smiles on, appreciates, is thankful for and delights in the other. True love grows out of true repentance. True love is reconciled to God.

May this season of Lent open you to true love as you become reconciled to God. Amen.

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