

Ash Wednesday
March 6, 2018

Pastor Lew Upchurch
Joel 2:12-13

“Give it Up”

The only light on in the house came from the muted TV. The man stared blankly at the screen as his family slept. He felt numb and hopeless. He stood up and paced the floor asking himself over and over the question of why? Why did he allow himself to be so weak? Why did he not say no? Why did he, as someone who confessed faith in Christ, ignore the very word of God? His heart sank. He made his way to the hallway bathroom, closed the door, and for the first time in many years felt tears as they ran down his face. He knew what he did was wrong. He knew that he had sinned. And he knew that fear had struck his conscience. All he could do was pray, “Lord forgive me.”

Tonight, we join this man in praying that very same prayer, because we too have allowed ourselves to be weak. We too have not said no. We too have ignored the very Word of God. We too have sinned. Through the prophet Joel, the Lord God sets the tone for this evening: “Yet even now,” declares the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.”

We hear God’s Word tonight, and somehow it all seems a little different. Perhaps it’s the mark of ashes upon our foreheads that give us an awareness of our sinfulness that make these words seem a little more serious, a little more real. Tonight maybe we can commit to honest reflection of our sin—maybe we can self-examine our lives, and actually tear our hearts wide open and lay all the evil we find inside at the feet of Jesus. Maybe. I mean, Joel tells us that the Lord is gracious and merciful. He is slow to anger and abounds in steadfast love. Maybe tonight is the night we lay it all there, repent, and return to God.

But what about tomorrow? Can we do it again? And what about all of the 40 days of Lent? Is God really calling us to turn away from sin, death, and the devil over and over? We know the answer, but think to ourselves “we don’t know if we can do that.” We welcome him into the dark and hollow depths of our souls tonight, but if we’re honest, even now we’re kind of guarded, aren’t we? We don’t really want him bringing us any real discomfort or disturbance in the way we run our lives. We don’t really want to change our habits. We don’t really want to be like that man pacing the floor, worrying

about the state of our souls. We all have enough problems in this world. And if this is really what God wants from us, maybe we can't deliver.

But that's just it. The reality is none of us can deliver what God wants—not only what he wants, but what he demands from us. Maybe we think we can. I mean how many of us make little goals for ourselves, goals that might even begin today that we have designed for ourselves? Maybe giving up booze, steak or sweets, or taking up an exercise plan, or doing a few more nice things for people that we normally don't do is going to make us little more attractive to God we might think. But sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but a healthier, slimmer, even nicer sinful you or me is still a sinner.

But what are we to do? The prophet says to return to the Lord. He says to fast, and mourn, and cry. If sure sounds like we need to suffer a little bit in order to get God's attention. It sure sounds like we at least need to formulate some kind of plan of self-improvement, doesn't it? Well, let me take you back to the man at the beginning.

I recently had a conversation with him. Because as I thought about Ash Wednesday, his sinful struggle kept popping into my mind. So I gave him a call. I told him I would be preaching tonight, and asked him if I could share just a piece of his experience in the opening. He agreed. We talked for a little while longer. I asked him how things were at home. He said they were much better. I asked him how things were regarding his faith, and he said they couldn't be better. I was a little shocked, quite frankly. But he went on to tell me that the word of God had really penetrated his heart when he was caught up in his terrible sin, and it drove him to despair. He said that he was literally on the road to hell before God's Word did this to him. But he never took any credit for his repentance—it was all God's work, he told me.

Of course I knew that, but hearing it from someone who experienced it in such a real and raw way, was truly a gift. "People think they can come to God with repentance, but that's God's work," he continued. "We then turn from our sin— that is we stop doing the thing.... I was only able to do that and repent, because I am saved through faith in Christ," he said. Did you catch that? Because he is saved, he told me—not to get saved — but because he is saved, he was able to turn. It was amazing to hear. And so I asked him if I could share this part with you and of course he agreed.

But he wasn't finished. He then said, "if you're going to use any part of my story on Ash Wednesday, please make sure your people hear this. "Ok," I said. "Hear what?" "Make sure they hear that they need to give it up." "What do you mean," I said? "What I mean

is that we're all so good at making God's love contingent upon the things that we do, and it's simply not true. We all have to give that up."

And so, I share this with you tonight. Death is staring us all in the face. I mean take a look at the person beside you. The ashes on our foreheads is a reminder, not only of our sin, but that the wages of that sin is death itself. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust— and there's nothing we can do to stop it! No amount of money; no amount of power; no efforts on our part can do anything about it. So my friend was right because our confession of sin—our repentance—really starts with saying, "we give up."

We give up the logic that we so desperately cling to that turns the good news of Christianity into our plan of self-improvement. We give up pretending to be anything other than the flawed human beings that we are. We give up, and by doing so we will find in this brutal honesty, relief.

Return to me, says the Lord. You can't do it on your own, but through my Spirit, I will allow my word to make you aware of your sin. I will allow you to be honest and say that you are a sinner and allow you to believe this to be true. And at the same time, you cant do it on your own, but through my Spirit, I will allow my word to speak to you my Gospel —that sure and certain promise that I have taken your sin upon myself, have paid the price, and give you forgiveness, life, and salvation.

So, tonight and throughout these days and weeks to come in Lent, give it up and allow Christ to put the focus on himself. And when you do, be assured that he will take care of the rest today and forever. Thanks be to God. **Amen.**