

"I'm Sorry Are the Hardest Words"

Ash Wednesday, Lent 2018: Rehab

Luke 18:9-14

Today is the start of the season called Lent, a forty day journey that leads us to Easter. Actually, that's not entirely true. Lent is forty-six days, but the Sundays between now and Easter don't technically count. You see, 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 eating. This time is modelled after Jesus' experience of forty days in the desert. However, every Sunday in church we celebrate Christ's resurrection, so it would be inappropriate to fast on Sundays.

I was curious how long the church had been celebrating Ash Wednesday, and the answer rather surprised me. Using ashes as a form of 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. That's pretty messy. In fact, I learned that the early Christian church used to do the ashes the same way – by dumping them on people's heads! Later, it became more popular (thankfully!) to simply mark a person's forehead with the sign of the cross. However, the original intent must not be lost – ashes were dirty and messy – and they represented how messed up people are. Think about the times we see ashes – after something has been destroyed by fire, only ashes are there to remind us of what was.

I don't believe we live in a world where it is easy for people to grieve. I think it is difficult for people to look in themselves and deal with the messiness.

Lent is not a popular holiday – everybody likes Fat Tuesday! But who wants to confess and practice penitence? Not many. "I'm sorry," are the hardest words to say to others, let alone saying them to God.

We read this short story in the book in Luke, Chapter 8, about two people who were trying to figure out their lives. At first, we read this story and think, "Oh, good! The Pharisee is the bad guy; the tax collector is the good guy. Jesus wants us to be like the tax collector. Got it." But maybe you should know, you probably have more in common with the Pharisee. When we read the stories, especially in Luke, about Jesus confronting the Pharisees, we start to think that they are evil. Ooh, bad Pharisee. The truth is, however, they were faithful Jews. Pharisees are a lot like Christians who work very hard at pleasing God. They tithed, they went to "church" (the temple), they read their bibles (scriptures), and they prayed. 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, that 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.

Clearly the tax collector is the hero in Jesus' story, but you might not know that much about the Roman tax system. It was probably worse than the IRS. In Roman territory, local people essentially 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 man became a tax collector. Maybe he had no choice. Maybe his father was a tax collector. But for whatever reason, this man knew he was a traitor. He didn't make excuses before God, like the Pharisee. The only finger he pointed was at himself. He 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. Jesus commended the one who said, "I'm sorry."

I don't know about your life right now, but I can feel the weight of my sin and my actions. There is a lot in my life that I regret. I certainly know that I cannot stand before a holy God and say, "Hey, look how perfect I am." That's why we need Lent. That's why we need Ash Wednesday. To remind ourselves that our lives are messy, and thankfully, God specializes in messiness. Today is not a fad, not some cool think we do in the church. It is a serious moment, when we can be honest with ourselves and with God. These next forty days are specifically designed by God to test us, correct us, and move us to the place God wants us to be.

Let us take the time today to tell God how sorry we are. Amen.