

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:2  
Ash Wednesday A

Rev. Jonathan E. Scharf  
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### Be Reconciled!

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” the man said to the emergency worker. “But sir, you’ve just been in a pretty bad crash. Why don’t you let us take you in to the hospital and check you out?”

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” he said again. “But sir, you’ve got some cuts and some pretty deep bruises. There may be some internal damage. Please let us check you out,” the EMT pleaded.

“That’s enough,” the man said. “I told you there’s nothing wrong with me.” And he had his wife drive him home, where later that night, he died of internal bleeding.

“There’s nothing wrong with me” can be one of the most dangerous phrases in the world, because it just ain’t so. And it’s even more dangerous when applied to us spiritually. So that is why we celebrate, or maybe better said, we commemorate Ash Wednesday. Tonight, we are reminded to be the publican in the back of the temple – recognizing what’s wrong and realizing that only God can make it right.

In our text from 2 Corinthians 5 and 6, the Holy Spirit inspired the apostle Paul to beg us to see that. In the verse just before our text, Paul had written that God reconciled the world to himself in Christ, but now he opens our text with that plea – **“We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.”**

Be reconciled to God. Are you familiar with that term “reconcile”? It’s where you try to take two things that are different and bring them together. When your checkbook says you’ve got \$1500 in it, but your bank says there’s only \$3 – some reconciling needs to take place. The football world is looking at the NFL Player’s Union and the Owners to do some reconciling so that there can be a season next year. When mom wants the new van and dad wants a boat and there’s only enough money for one – some reconciling needs to take place. When two sisters haven’t spoken in 10 years – reconciling needs to happen. So when we are told to be reconciled with God – that means there’s a separation there. That means there’s hostility there. That means there’s something wrong.

And trying to convince ourselves that in that equation: “There’s nothing wrong with me” is not the answer. All the wrong rests on me. So we gather for Ash Wednesday. We gather to see the stain of our sin. That’s why that custom of ashes on the forehead has been practiced for at least a thousand years on this day. But the stain of our sin is not just some smudge. It’s not something that will come off in the next shower we take. That ash is just a picture to remind us of that dirtier, invisible, disgusting stain, that internal bleeding that isn’t always so obvious. Think of the ways the stain of sin is described in Scripture: as crimson on a white cloth, or as dung, fecal matter, or old used menstrual rags, or death, decay...think of the long-dead hunk of roadkill by the side of the road covered with flies and torn apart by the birds, the thing that makes you gag a little when you breathe in the air affected by it. That is not something you or I want to hang out with – much less will a holy God. In fact, the gulf between us and God was so vast that it is physically and spiritually impossible for the Holy God to have such stench as us in his presence. I know that’s harsh, but when you come to grips with that you won’t be able to say, “There is nothing wrong with me.” When you come to grips with the stain, the death, the revulsion of sin that you and I carry around – you’ll get why Paul begs us to be reconciled. We need it.

And the thing is - the work of that reconciliation has already happened. Look at our text: **“God made him who had no sin...”** Real literally, it says that he made him who did not know sin, who did not have any experience with sin – he made him sin for us. He didn’t make him *a sinner* that did some good things and some bad. He made him SIN. Righteous God looked at his holy Son and instead saw the vile, nauseating, disgusting totality of sin, that sin that is such an offence to God’s holiness that it triggers God’s infinite holy wrath that must destroy it. And he did. Why? The verse continues: **“So that we might become the righteousness of God.”** That is what we view in Lent – the wrath of God poured out on His Son, the full punishment and vindication – every natural urge you’ve had to get back at someone who’s wronged you, to punish the murderers and rapists and scum, every urge of justice in you combined and magnified to a divine level – all of that was focused in like a laser and isolated on Christ, to get rid of everything that separates us from God.

And here is the message of Ash Wednesday: You need that reconciliation. Understand that. Grasp that. Comprehend that. Paul writes: **“We urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain.”** The grace is there. You know the words: righteousness, justification, reconciliation...you can even sing the hymns – “Jesus sinners does receive” and some of you even have the ashes on the forehead. We’ve received the trappings of grace. But the warning is there, because the danger is there. Don’t let all those beautiful words and pictures of forgiveness, the white robes, the purified gold...Don’t let that all be in vain. In other words, don’t ever become that Pharisee standing in the front of the temple, thinking that because we are here, because we give our offerings and go through the ceremonies and do the good things, because we help our families and are better than our neighbors – that somehow we don’t need as much reconciling.

Read Chapter 6, verse 1. **“As God’s fellow workers, we urge you (we beg you) not to receive God’s grace in vain.”** Yes, the payment for sins is done. Grace is here. So let’s not look at it lightly. Let’s not ever let it become some magic formula that if I can recite John 3:16, I’m OK. Let it not happen that our minds are not constantly cognizant of this truth, that there is a minute that we aren’t living with the realization of our need and the gift of God that fills it, in other words, living in faith.

As much as the society we’re living in tries to help us make excuses for how good we are and the bad we do isn’t really bad – it’s someone else’s fault – let’s never forget these ashes – and the blood of Jesus that washes them away. Let’s never forget our need, our sickness – and the Word of God that is that balm in Gilead, that healing salve for our troubled consciences. Don’t forget your weakness – and how much we need the strengthening feast our Savior prepared for us here – giving us the body and blood he sacrificed as our sin – so that in Him, in this, we might become the righteousness of God.

You see, when we realize that everything is wrong with me – we can celebrate that Christ has made it true that now – “There’s really nothing wrong with me.” There’s nothing wrong with you, not in God’s eyes. Thank God His Word reminds us of our ashes, so that we can see His love. In Christ, who has reconciled the world to God, be reconciled. Amen.

Text:

**2 Corinthians 5:20 - 6:2** We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup>  
God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the  
righteousness of God. <sup>NIV</sup> **2 Corinthians 6:1** As God's fellow workers we urge you not

to receive God's grace in vain. <sup>2</sup> For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.