

**Message Delivered at Christ Church**  
**Ash Wednesday, 2010**  
**TEXTS: Psalm 51; Joel 2:1-2, 12-17**  
**Delivered by Paul A. Johnson**

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Today is Ash Wednesday. It's the beginning of Lent.

If you've been to an Ash Wednesday service before—maybe here, maybe somewhere else—you know it is not a particularly comfortable day in our liturgical life. It's not comfortable because today we are reminded of difficult things.

It is not a particularly comfortable day because the ashes remind us of our mortality. These ashes come from the palms we used at Palm Sunday worship last year...when we again re-lived and remembered Christ's Passion. We burn them, and then today mark our foreheads with them with a reminder that we are dust, and to dust we shall return.

And it is not a particularly comfortable day because today we are reminded poignantly of our sinfulness. After the ashes, we say Psalm 51 together. It's the greatest of the penitential psalms—written possibly by David after his disastrous manipulation of Bathsheba. "Purge me from my sin," the psalmist writes. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." He writes thus because he cannot purge himself; nor can he make his own heart clean or renew his own spirit. It is too much for him. So he asks God to do it; to help him.

And then, in the litany, we'll place before God the ways we have disobeyed and followed our own way. It's called a Litany of Penitence. But really what we're doing is confessing—admitting--that we have sinned in thought, word, and deed.

We do a confession almost every week in worship. It's called the General Confession. This one is a little bit more specific. It's deeper, and broader. It's kind of like the peanut butter spread all the way to the edges of the bread...it covers a lot. It won't be easy to squeeze through with these words. Pray it with all our being, and we may find our heart pierced.

But a broken and contrite heart our Lord does not despise, and in this confessional offering of ourselves we are also made clean. We make our confession with penitent hearts, and if our soul can at all be compared with a house, the clutter is taken away and the garbage removed. Not because we've done it; but because God has taken it away.

We're teaching this season on how what we do in worship can be brought into the lives we live everyday; how what we do when we're here together connects to our well-being when we go to where God has placed us in the world. And confession—and the reason we confess our sins in worship, particularly at this time of year—is the spiritual practice by which we ask God to make us right; which is what we so deeply desire all the time; which is why we so intentionally make confession during this time...not so that we will feel really bad, but so that we may receive the rightness that comes from God that we might be right with one another.

You see, repentance is a big part of the season of Lent. The word—in its most basic, original understanding—means "to change;" or "to turn;" or "to come back." Ultimately, that is the invitation of this season...intentional turning back to the Lord who keeps calling us back. When we pray for the Lord to accept our repentance, we are praying for God to accept our desire for rightness and returning. God just wants to have a relationship with all of us, and in Lent we pay attention to how God always calls us back.

But what we all know is that there's stuff in our lives that interferes with that relationship; stuff that gets in the way and keeps us distant and isolated; things we do, and things we say, and things that roll around in our hearts and minds that end up making a real mess. We're human beings, which means that we wander, and follow our own will, and find that the more we wander and follow our own path the farther from God we seem to find ourselves.

It's the human condition. We've all got that stuff. Those who are honest with themselves know firsthand how powerful sin and guilt are...they isolate us; they create fear; they make us smaller and more judgmental; they crush us under their weight, and make us shrivel. They break our hearts.

But it's with broken hearts that Jesus seems to do his best work.

We are intended to be right and whole and free; and that's what happens when we make confession...either here, or on our own, or to one another. By admitting our offenses—known and unknown--we bring them to the light. We bring them to the light, and place them in God's hands. We take those shadow parts of our being and name them, and release them, and let God take them away. Those dark places in our character and in our past...they lose their power, and we are made free. And we all want to be free.

You see, there is a spiritual truth at play in this day and during this season. It's the truth that cleaning house is part of living the Kingdom life. The old stuff is gotten rid of so that the new can find a home. Someone wiser than me put it this way: If someone gave you an old cottage in the mountains, before you put new furniture in you'd clean the whole thing out. Well, we're kind of like that cottage...except its God who does the cleaning. We just open the doors.

It matters how we come to confession...that there is some remorse on our part, and a desire for amendment of life and to be changed. After all, repentance is turning...so we don't want to keep going in the same direction.

But it also matters that we just keep bringing ourselves; that we just keep coming. This isn't something we ever finish with. For what it's worth--my own experience with house-cleaning is that it seems that every time we finish we have to turn around and get started again. We seem to be able to make our house messy just by living in it. Just by living—no matter how hard we try—we make life messy. So we come back; make our confession; and let the Lord clean house again.

So that's what we'll do—not for the first time, and not for the last. We'll make our confession. We'll hand all those things we name over to Jesus, who takes them; he does not hold them against us, but removes them and releases us from the burden of guilt, and shame, and fear. We'll rend our hearts, as it says in Joel, and offer them broken to God, knowing that this same God makes them whole.

And we'll remember that before the sign of the cross was made on our forehead in ashes, it was made on our foreheads in our baptism when the one who calls us back first marked us as his forever; and in so doing, we'll remember that it is not our sin that defines us, but the one who claims us who defines us; who is gracious, and merciful, and abounding in steadfast love; and who in Lent, and always, just keeps calling us back.