

Good Evening,

Can you see me okay? How do I look? Does my skin look okay? When I was working at Avid Technology, the leaders decided to bring in various health professionals to guide us on nutrition, the benefits of exercise, and Cancer screenings.

My friend Leah came into my office and was horrified. Your appointment is next and wait until you see they show you your skin damage! I went and boy, did I understand what she was talking about. Ugh, all these dark spots which were not apparent but were hidden under my skin. No one could see them, but they were there.

It makes me think about my soul and your souls. Have we dark spots that no one else can see? Ash Wednesday is the beginning of Lent, and this should be a time of inner reflection. It is not a time of beating ourselves up for mistakes and sins we have made but rather a time to look inward and then decide how we should go forward. Just as going back to beat myself up for wearing baby oil to get that perfect tan does not help, but the decision to wear sunblock is the way to go forward.

Lent is a time to look both inward and outward, to reflect back but also to go forward. Did you hear how beautifully Susan read the Gospel of Matthew? But did you notice something confusing?

Jesus tells us when we fast, not to look somber but instead put oil on our head, wash our faces – do our fasting in secret, but we gather here and put ashes on our foreheads in the sign of the cross for all to see!

Jesus tells us to give to the needy but so privately that our left hand should not know what our right hand is doing, but we give by passing a plate throughout the pews where others can see what money is being given.

Jesus tells us to pray by going into our room and *closing* the door, yet we pray here asking for prayers for ourselves and others out loud! What are we doing??

So, what **is** today all about? Ash Wednesday is a corporate gathering of Christians all over the world who unite to pray for everyone. We pray asking God to forgive our sins but also for each other's sins. We pray for people to come back to God. This is the Christian equivalent of the Jewish Yom Kippur, the most important holiday in the Jewish faith. Jews traditionally ask for forgiveness for their wrongdoings from God and from their fellow human beings. Jews strive to transcend their physical bodies on Yom Kippur so they can focus on their souls.

A perfect description of this is in **Joel 2:12-18 (NLT)**

A Call to Repentance

¹² That is why the Lord says,

“Turn to me now, while there is time.

Give me your hearts. ***God wants us now – don't wait***

Come with fasting, weeping, and mourning. ***Mourning was ashes & sackcloth***
¹³ Don't tear your clothing in your grief,
but tear your hearts instead. ***We need to open our hearts to God – Let Him in!!***
Return to the Lord your God,
for he is merciful and compassionate,
slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love.
He is eager to relent and not punish. ***God wants to forgive us***

¹⁴ Who knows? Perhaps he will give you a reprieve,
sending you a blessing instead of this curse.
Perhaps you will be able to offer grain and wine
to the Lord your God as before. ***God wants us to help others – sacrifices***

¹⁵ Blow the ram's horn in Jerusalem!
Announce a time of fasting;
call the people together
for a solemn meeting. ***Ash Wednesday***

¹⁶ Gather all the people—
the elders, the children, and even the babies.
Call the bridegroom from his quarters
and the bride from her private room. ***Here we are – gathered together for God***

¹⁷ Let the priests, who minister in the Lord's presence,
stand and weep between the entry room to the Temple and the altar.
Let them pray, "Spare your people, Lord!
Don't let your special possession become an object of mockery.
Don't let them become a joke for unbelieving foreigners who say,
'Has the God of Israel left them?'" ***Today, people wonder if there are those
who still believe in God – we must stand up and say, YES, we are people of
God. That's what the ashes on our foreheads say. We pray to God not only
for ourselves, but for those who have strayed away and those who have gone
amiss. We ARE a people of prayer and hope!***

The Lord's Promise of Restoration

¹⁸ Then the Lord will pity his people

and jealously guard the honor of his land. ***How desperately our country needs God – If people only followed the 10 Commandments and the teachings of Jesus, what a difference it would be.***

Okay, we are gathered here, which is a great start but now what? Susan read that Jesus gave His disciples three spiritual disciplines to follow, and those are the “go forward” part of Lent:

1. **Give to the Needy** – we give in church, but there are other ways as well. Do you have a warm jacket, hat or gloves sitting in your closet that you haven't worn for some time. Why not put it in our blessing box on the porch? The next time you grocery shop, how about picking up a couple of extra things to give to the food pantry. Make a special donation to the church for our Watoto children. When you do these things, don't brag about it, just do it quietly – you know and God knows.
2. **Pray** – Pray in your home, pray in your car, pray intensely. During Lent, perhaps you can add an extra 30 minutes to your prayer time or take the time read your Bible. What a wonderful thing it is that we can pray anywhere or any time. For several years Ted and I have seen this husband and wife walk each day – they have their Rosary Beads in hand praying as they walk. They are quiet and most people never notice those beads as they hold them close. No show – just prayer.
3. **Fast** – Fasting has really become a thing of the past. Fasting was giving up a meal, or a type of food, but it had to be meaningful. I can give up ice cream – sounds good, doesn't it? The only thing is, I don't care about ice cream. I have one ice cream cone a year so not very sacrificial, is it? But bread – oh, warm bread out of the oven.....and I can eat a whole loaf. Giving up bread for me, means sacrifice. Going without has gone out of style in our culture– But in reality, food is a gift from God and going without is a heartfelt, body-felt exclamation point at the end of the sentence “I love you, God. I need you more than I need food — more than I need life.”

At the end of the reading, Jesus reminds them God does not care about the possessions we accumulate here on earth, he cares about what we have done here, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” ^{Vs. 21}

Lastly the most important thing to note is that Jesus says **when** – when you give to the needy, not if you give to the needy. **When** you pray, not if you pray. **When** you fast, not if you fast. Over these 40 days, let there be a renewal in us just as there is in Spring – all the old leaves and debris raked up and disposed of, to make room for the new blades of grass, daffodils, and tulips. It is a fresh start for the earth and for us.

Amen