

ASH WEDNESDAY – (Homily 03)

“Be the Righteousness of God”

(Joel 2:12-18; Psalm 51; 2 Cor 5:20-6:2; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18)

The message that emerges from the readings for today’s Ash Wednesday celebration leaps out at us from the second reading, Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians.

St. Paul urges his readers to be reconciled to God first, then to become the righteousness of God. We are to be reconciled and renewed.

Joel in the first reading echoes that clarion call from St. Paul. For his part, the prophet Joel urges his people to return to God and to repent sincerely from the heart. He calls them to *metanoia*, to change directions, to turn around 180% and come back to God.

Gerald May, in his writings, puts this biblical calling into more modern and psychological terms. He says that God has given us free will, allowing us to be either willful or willing. To be willful is to be stubborn, to do our own will, which inevitably lands us in trouble, namely, addiction. The other choice is to be humble, to let go of our own stubborn pride and deep rooted selfishness, and to be willing to do God’s will in our lives. That choice and that choice alone, leads to a life of happy free sobriety.

We could call this a spirituality of facing the right direction. At birth we are hard wired for God, intended to be fully united with God one day in eternal bliss. However, from the moment we are born into this sinful and wounded world, we experience a lack of love. That lack of love can take many shapes and forms, from addicted parents to neglect and abuse.

Psychologists offer us two responses to that hurt – fight or flight. If we are anger-based people, we will fight back instantaneously. If we are fear-based persons, we will flee. We can flee in a myriad of ways. We can escape into alcohol or drugs, sex or pleasure, work or silent treatment – the list goes on. Neither way is healthy. These coping skills only help us to survive. However, we are called by God not just to survive life, but to live life to the full, happy and free.

A Charlie Brown cartoon can illustrate this reality. Charlie Brown is playing ball

with his cap and glove and is talking to himself. In the first frame, he informs us that he really doesn't mind that he has been placed in right field where no one ever hits a ball anyway. In the second frame, he mutters that he really doesn't mind that the grass is so high that even if a ball did come his way, he would not be able to see it. In the third frame, he says that he doesn't really mind that his parents came to watch him play ball and they can't see him because of the tall grass. In the final frame, he confesses that what really bothers him is that he doesn't even know if he is facing the right direction!

We so often find ourselves like Charlie Brown. Our painful experience of life in this world of hard knocks has turned us away from God. Many people basically lose their faith in a God who loves them, when they are hurt, and start to place their faith in false gods that don't love them, false gods of possessions, pleasure, prestige and power that will eventually entrap them. The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous calls these false gods money, fame and power. We may be doing many good things as we go, but we are basically facing the wrong direction, and drifting further away from God and even from our true selves.

In the Gospel, Jesus gives us a pattern for healthy spiritual living that will keep us focused on God, take us back to God and even make us like God. It is a pattern that is based on love, God's love for us and our love for God, others and ourselves. We are to pray sincerely and from the heart. That is our way of loving God back. We are to give alms without fanfare. That is our way of loving others. The alms we give can be money, or they can be our time, concern, caring and sharing. Finally, we are to fast without drawing attention to ourselves. To fast is a way of loving ourselves, to take care of ourselves, to let go of the excesses in our lives so that we can be more focused, grounded and healthier in all ways.

Living out these three Gospel imperatives is actually a way of living the Great Commandment that Jesus gave us. To pray is to love God. To give alms is to love others. And to fast is to love ourselves.

To be reconciled to God, then, is to repent, to acknowledge our wrong doing and sin, to confess that reality, to receive not just forgiveness, but also healing for our sinfulness, that which made us sin in the first place.

To be the righteousness of God is to live the commands, to pray, to fast and to give alms. The best alms that we can give anyone is to heed Jesus' command to love our enemies. We do that by forgiving our enemies and doing good to those who hurt us. Matthew 18:15 suggests that we love our enemies and ourselves by sharing

with them our feelings about how they have hurt us, with love, which means no revenge or retribution. When we can do that, when we can forgive like that, we become just like Jesus on the cross. And when we act like God, we get to feel like God. Our serenity, our dignity, our innocence comes back, because we are just like Jesus. We have truly become the righteousness of God.

After Pope JP II recovered from being shot during an assassination attempt, he went to visit Agfa, his would-be assassin in prison. The pope communicated his forgiveness to this man who had attempted to end his life. JP II understood that this man was a lost son of God, even a brother who needed help, not punishment. The pope took the time to learn about his life and even helped out his poor mother back in Arabia. He was truly being the righteousness of God for this wounded human being.

The Eucharist that we celebrate now is a celebration that calls us to repent through the penitential rite. It offers us healing through God's Word and the Body and Blood of Jesus. Finally, we are sent out to be the righteousness of God.

So let us heed the readings of scripture for today, repent from the heart, be reconciled to God and become the righteousness of God.