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“The Mirror of Ash Wednesday”

A sermon by Mindy Douglas

Ash Wednesday (Year A)

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Psalm 51; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday is arguably the most powerful day of the Christian year. It is also perhaps the most difficult. This is why you won't find us crammed together in our pews for tonight's service the way we were on Christmas Eve. No. Tonight's service is not for the faint of heart. Ash Wednesday is also not likely to be embraced by the culture around us the way Mardi Gras is with its king cakes and colorful beads. We won't see any sackcloth and ashes displayed at Wal-Mart or CVS between Valentine's Day and Easter. We won't see any Hallmark Cards with the bold words "REPENT" across the top, or with "Remember you are dust . . ." on the cover. The message will not sell.

Ash Wednesday, you see, is the day when all the excesses of the world are stripped away from us, and we are asked to stand bare before our God, in all honesty, in all truth, in all repentance and come to terms with who we are as God's creatures, who we are before God. This day, in a way unlike any other, requires self-examination, and requires self-awareness. This day requires that we acknowledge who we are as beings created from the dust by God. This day requires that we acknowledge our total and unwavering dependence upon God. This day requires that we confess how we have sinned and fallen short of who God has intended for us to be. And this is not easy to do.

At my grandmother's house, there is a long narrow mirror hanging on one of her walls. The mirror looks normal at first, but when you stand in front of it, you notice something different about yourself. The mirror distorts you. Makes you look . . . well, better. It takes about an inch off either side of you, which for most folks is a

good thing. And it does so in such a way that you hardly notice it's wrong. I mean, you don't *look* distorted. My sister and I call it "the skinny mirror," and as teenagers, we loved to crowd in front of it to see how we would look. We also argued the merits of having a skinny mirror versus one that gave a more accurate reflection. She thought the fantasy would be an inspiration for people who wanted to lose ten pounds. I thought it was more important to see reality and move forward from there. Maybe that's why I find Ash Wednesday to be such a profound and transformative day for me. Because I am asked to come face to face with the reality of who I am. And who I have failed to be. Most of us don't like to be laid so bare. Author Janet Malcolm writes:

There are a few among us . . . who are blessed or cursed with a strange imperviousness to the unpleasantness of self-knowledge. Their lies to themselves are so convincing that they are never unmasked. These are the people who never feel in the wrong, who are always able to justify their conduct, and who in the end . . . cause their fallible fellow-men to turn from them.¹

She adds that all of us carry a little bit of this tendency with us:

We are all perpetually soothing and rearranging reality to conform to our wishes; we lie to others and ourselves constantly, unthinkingly. When occasionally – and not by dint of our own efforts but under the pressure of external events – we are forced to see things as they are, we are like naked people in a storm.²

Now, really. Who wants to come to a worship service that will force us to see things as they really are—to be like naked people in a storm? Is there any wonder why this sanctuary is not packed?

Of course not. Because on Ash Wednesday, the liturgy of the day invites us to step away from the false mirror and step in front of the true one—where we see ourselves as we really are. Bare before God. And I don't know how it is for you, but for me, it isn't a pretty picture.

¹ As quoted by Fleming Rutledge in *The Bible and the New York Times*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), p. 87.

² *Ibid.*

But here is what I have figured out after taking part in this service for almost every year I can remember. If I miss out on this holy day of the year, if I *don't* stand in front of that clearest and most accurate of all mirrors, I am living falsely to myself, and I am living falsely before God. If I do not gather with my friends in Christ at some time during this season and say before you—"This is who I am. This is how I have sinned against God. This is how I have sinned against you. Forgive me, God."—then I am not able to know myself fully or to accept myself as fully loved and as fully forgiven by an incredibly gracious and merciful God. And without this knowledge of God's love and forgiveness of every part of me, even the ugliest parts, I will never truly be at peace, and I will never truly understand the extent of God's love.

Recently, I received an email from one of my best friends in college who lives now with her family down in Alabama and whom I haven't seen in over fifteen years. She closed her email by saying, "I love you, friend. Even though we have not been together for years, I feel you know me as few others ever will." And that one line brought me to tears. I was overwhelmed by it because of its honesty and openness from her perspective, but also because of the truth of the statement when turned around and said from my perspective. This woman is a friend I have known since my first semester in college. We lived on the same hall. We ate together, played together, laughed together and cried (a lot) together. She has seen into the depths of my soul in a way few others ever will. And yet she still loves me.

Still she loves me.

Now take that love and multiply it by a million, or a billion, or as much as you are able to comprehend, and then you will have a hint of the steadfast love and abundant mercy of our God who knows us deep into the depths of our souls. Just a hint. And that's what the psalmist had. Psalm 51, the one we sang just a bit ago, is thought to be David's prayer of repentance after Bathsheba. The psalmist knew enough about God's love and mercy that he was able to claim his own sin against God, "Against you, you alone, have I sinned."

And do we not know that much more about God's love and mercy? We who live on this side of the cross. We who have come to know Jesus as a healer, a teacher, a prophet, and even more, as a Savior. We who will stand together on Easter Sunday

and shout “The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed!” Do we not know that much more about God’s sacrifice for us? We who know of Jesus’ betrayal, his suffering, and his death? We who know that on the night of his arrest Jesus took bread and broke it and gave it to his disciples saying, “This is my body, given for you; this is my blood, shed for you?” Do we not know that much more about God’s resurrection power as Jesus defeated death and released us from the power of sin? Do we not know that the sin that holds us does not have the last say? That we are set free by Christ’s redemptive love and transformative grace?

Do we not know that when we stand before the mirror which is the clearest, the closest to reality and see ourselves as we are, we are looking at the very person God created and loves, the very person God wants desperately to be in relationship with. We are the very ones God has forgiven and will forgive.

But ultimately, Ash Wednesday isn’t about us at all, is it? It is about God. This day is about how God created us. About how God was at our beginning and will be at our end. About how God loves us so much that we are given another chance to live into God’s abundant grace. On this day, we celebrate that love that transforms us when we acknowledge our utter dependence upon God. We are called to confess our sins and then to let them go. We are called to begin again by the power of God in Christ—by the power of the empty cross.

So let us pray together:

Create in us clean hearts, O God. And put new and right spirits within us. We can’t do this on our own. We are fully dependent upon you.

Help us.

Save us.

Forgive us.

Love us.

Transform us.

To God be the glory. Now and forever. Amen.