

Faith United Church of Christ

“An inclusive spiritual family

shaping a better you for creating a better world.

A place to make a difference.”

We are delighted that you are here this evening! We hope you will find us an affirming, uplifting, and committed family of faith. Here we work to make everyone, without any exceptions, to feel accepted, inspired, and encouraged in their spiritual journey. In dialogue, we seek to understand. In encouragement, we seek to heal. In all things we yearn to live by love, for peace, with joy. This is a place where your intellect will be challenged, your heart will be nurtured, and your spirit refreshed. Varying beliefs are expressed openly and freely, and your doubts will not be suppressed. We trust that we are all, every person and part of creation, continuing to be blessed by God's grace; and that in community we can help each other to see this grace alive in our lives and relationships. We hope to share our gifts with you, even as we pray that you will want to share your gifts with us. Whoever you are and wherever you may be in your life's journey, we invite you to be a part of our lives and our spiritual home. Welcome!

Ash Wednesday: The Beginning of Lent

March 1, 2017 at 7 p.m.

Prelude

I Call to Thee, Lord Jesus Christ

J. S. Bach

Introduction to a Season of Introspection & Discernment

Ash Wednesday is a ancient tradition that continues to have relevance in our spiritual lives today. While many progressive churches downplay the concept of sin and the need for confession, Lent is a needed time for us to examine our lives with critical inspection — for unless we admit where we need improvement in ourselves, we will not be able to make improvements.

It is important, especially in the times in which we live, to remember that the things we need to work on are not only on not doing things we have done wrongly, but also on those things we have not done and should have done. To live justly, for instance, does not mean simply not causing harm to others, but also coming to the defense of those whom others have harmed.

Perhaps now more than in decades, we need to be advocates for those who are oppressed, whose rights are being denied, and for whom they do not have the power of voice or influence.

Lent is often associated with a time for giving up things. Often people will give up certain foods, or even go on a fast. Others may give up other things they like as a commitment to self-sacrifice. But maybe we need to give up things that keep us from being in right relationship with others; things like: apathy, condescension, ridicule, prejudices, impatience, possessiveness to things we think are “ours,” and so on.

As we enter into this time of self-reflection, ask yourself how you can be a better person — not just by what you don't do, but what how you act towards and on behalf of others. Consider how you might make the world a better place one random act of kindness at a time, or better yet, one intentional deed of compassion at a time. May that which is sacred fill you this evening and throughout these 40 days of Lent.

*Centering Our Souls

Jesus came to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the year of God's favor.

As disciples of Christ, we are called to struggle against everything that leads us away from the love of God and neighbor. Repentance, fasting, prayer, forgiveness, mercy, generosity, gratitude, study of sacred texts, and habitual works of kindness, justice, compassion, non-violence, and peace help us to return to that love.

*Song of Intention

“Again We Keep This Solemn Fast”

#187; vss. 1, 3, 4

Prayer of Confession

Read in Unison

O God who suffers at our spiritual and ethical failings, and rejoices at the turning to virtue of our hearts and spirits: We confess that we have gone astray by our thoughts, words, and deeds. We have been irresponsible by what we have done, as well as what we have left undone. We have diverted our attention away from your call to serve others as Christ served. We have ignored your encouragements to be more loving and forgiving. We have abandoned the way of peace when we confronted with fears. We have placed prudence above integrity, and self-interest over honor. We have valued acknowledgment more than duty, and pride more than reverence. We have hypocritically judged others while maintaining that others should not judge us. We have been impatient when we were unwilling to be persistent.

We have been apathetic in our privilege, and insincere in our advocacy. We have blindly indulged our appetites at the expense of others. We have developed life-styles that are bent on having more than enough, and attitudes that are self-justifying of our excesses. We have exploited other people and your creation both directly and indirectly. We have let envy infiltrate our minds, rather than being glad about the good fortunes of others. We have prejudiced ourselves against others by evaluating their worth based on what they do rather than how you created them. We have let our frustrations turn into anger, and our annoyances into condescension. We have been dishonest to ourselves, and consequently to others and you.

We have been negligent in studying sacred texts, in listening to you, in being present in worship, and in allowing ourselves the time to do your will rather than our own. We have been indifferent to human needs and the sufferings of other parts of your creation. We have counted our own life-enhancing wants above the life-requiring needs of others. We have allowed cruelty to animals in order to serve our own desires. We have been silent at the injustices of others by faithlessly assuming that our own words and actions will not matter. We have let waste and pollution defile the beauty and dignity of your creation by our tacit approval of a culture of consumerism. We have become voyeurs of the private lives of others and have emotionally applauded the downfalls of those we have come to despise. We have been credulous in assuming the worst about others rather than seeking to understand with the intent to encourage.

Forgive us for all our failings that we may be restored to the loving and compassionate beings that you created us to be. May the image we project in our lives be one and the same as that in which you developed in our souls at our birth — the image of goodness and loving-kindness. May it be so. would become our falls and our sins would become our death. But with faithfulness, we rise from the ashes to new life and walk courageously and steadfastly on with integrity, honor, and authenticity.

We light the candle of kindness and gentleness, affirming that the family of God must reside with one another as brothers and sisters within this earthly household – learning to respect each other, being considerate of all, displaying friendliness, creating and keeping the peace, and showing warmth and grace in all circumstances. With kindness and gentleness, we nurture and build each other up, encourage and support one another, nourish and sustain what is best in each of us, and inspire one and all to live by our higher calling from God.

We light the candle of compassion that is the heart of our Christian call to serve. By the light of this candle, we find the strength to forgive, the power to display mercy, and the joy of being generous. It is the flame within us that gives light to others -- reestablishing their candle of hope, relighting their flame of dignity and worth, and also kindling their hearts towards compassion. By its light, we come to understand. By its warmth, we come to help, heal, and reconcile.

We light the candle of love, acknowledging our very purpose for living in unconditional and impartial caring concern for all. In love there is no judgment and no fear. In love there is an equality of value and worth placed on each person; where treatment of others is always respectful, benevolent, and beneficent. Love is that virtue that is supported by, and contains, all the other virtues. It is the culmination of all the others as exemplified in the Golden Rule and in the Greatest Commandment. When we do to others as we would like to be done to, and love others as we love ourselves, then the Kingdom of God has arrived within us and we need only to spread that love so that it will also arrive among us. Love is our light and our truth. It was revealed to us in Christ Jesus, and is the Spirit that leads us on the path of righteousness to that joy and happiness that is sublimely divine. Led by God's love, we are invited to share all we are and all we have as our love gift to the world...to gather in one holy community where we all sit down at the same table and partake of God's blessings in all their abundance.

Homily

Worship through Tithes and Offerings

The offerings we collect this evening will go to support the Pastoral Discretionary Fund, used to help those in need in our community.

Silent Meditation and Writing Out Our Commitment Cards

Imposition of Ashes

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return.” --- Genesis 3.19

Ashes represent the dust from which we were created and to which we will return. We come from the earth, and will again become earth. Rather than making us feel inferior, a true sense of our connectedness and equality of worth with all creation should make us feel blessed — no more than any other part, but still not insignificant. We are sacred, just as the earth and each part of creation is sacred. God made us, and declared each of us good. God did not claim any part of creation to be better or best, nor worse or worst. Each is in need of the other in order for the harmony God intended to be fulfilled. We are all dust...sacred dust — a reminder for us to be humble as we consider our relationship

with the earth and all its inhabitants, and a recognition of our relationship with the Creator God who, though loving us unconditionally, expects of us to act responsibly as we do the same.

The ashes used in our service are the charred remains of the palm leaves. Though once bound together in unity as a branch of honor and praise, they are now disintegrated into brokenness and the darkness of sin. They summon us to remember that Lent is a time for putting away our “Hallelujahs!” and “Hosannas” of celebration so that we may reflect on how we may be better restored to right relationship with God and our neighbors far and near. Even as the ashes remind us of our finitude and brokenness, so the oil reminds us of God's healing balm that rejoins those ashes and mixes with them to create a renewed spirit and a restored earth. It is a reminder of God's creative power to take dust and breathe into it life. That is God's good news!

“Repent, and believe in the good news.” --- Mark 1.15

*All who wish to do so may come forward, forming a line,
to receive the ashes and oil on your forehead.*

*Musical Interlude *(played during the Imposition of Ashes)*

“Spirit Song”

“Nearer, My God, to Thee”

“Dear Lord and Father of Mankind” *(if necessary)*

“Just As I Am, Without One Plea” *(if necessary)*

or selections by the organist

Assurance of Pardon and New Life

God's grace has touched you. God has forgiven your sins with mercy, and accepted your repentance with compassion. Welcome, therefore, the Holy Spirit into your heart and soul that you may be restored to newness of life in Christ. Amen

Response of Repentance

Read in Unison

Holy God of mercy and justice, we have offered up our sins to you in penitence. We know that you do not delight in humility for the sake of humility, so encourage us to fast for the right reasons and in the right ways. We accept your forgiveness for our past sins, and look forward to the new life you offer to us.

Let us go forth in a spiritual fast that will turn our hearts and souls from cynicism to faithfulness...from judgment to compassion...from defeatism to hopefulness...from self-pity to righteous action...from resentment to forgiveness...from gossip to praise...from jealousy to trust...from despair to assurance...from annoyance to respect...from ingratitude to thankfulness...from self-interest to service...from fear to courage...from hostility to kindness...from scorn to caring concern...from condescension to justice. Purge the darkness of our spirits with the light of your salvation. May it be so.

Hymn of Community and Belonging “In All Our Living” #499

Lights on the Christian Way: Virtues to Live By

There are many Christian virtues enumerated and alluded to in the Biblical texts. But some are referred to with enough regularity to warrant them as central to our understanding and practice of discipleship in following Christ's own example. Though many others are worthy of our cultivation and habituation than are listed here, perfecting the following virtues would naturally lead us to acquire the others.

HUMBLENESS/HUMILITY	FAITHFULNESS/FORTITUDE
THANKFULNESS/GRATITUDE	KINDNESS/GENTLENESS
PEACE/JUSTICE	COMPASSION/MERCY
LOVE	

We light the candle of humility and humbleness, reminding ourselves that we are dust and affirming that a spirit of humble reverence will also require of us patience, equanimity, selflessness, moderation, composure, and self-control in every area of our lives so that we do not overvalue ourselves, undervalue others, or devalue what is God's.

We light the candle of gratitude and thankfulness, expressing our praise and appreciation to God who has been so good to us for creating a world that nurtures and sustains all life...who has created us with the capacity to enjoy the beauty, splendors, blessings, gifts, and mysteries of life...who has made us interdependent with all things, and called us to be good stewards of the earth.

We light the candle of peace and justice, recognizing that these are necessary for the building up of a healthy and harmonious community here on earth...that they are God's intended design for how we should be in relationship to one another...that they are both our goal and our destiny...and that there can be no peace without justice, and no justice without peace.

We light the candle of faithfulness and fortitude, remembering God's own fidelity and our own struggle to be faithful. Faithfulness requires of us unflinching resolve and undying commitment. Without faithfulness, fortitude, determination, dedication, diligence, perseverance, and our trust that God's way is our salvation and our path of freedom in becoming who we are and were created to be, our stumbles

Hymn for Living by Love

sung during Offertory

"Take Time to be Loving"

Tune: Holiness 65.65D

Music: George C. Stebbins, 1890; Words: Bret Stuart Myers, 7/12/2007

Verse 1

Take time to be loving, do more than just pray;
Make kindness to others your habit each day.
Touch those who are suffering with actions that heal;
By word and by conduct, your love they will feel.

Verse 2

Take time to be loving, your motives be pure;
Love not out of ego, your virtue be sure;
Seek not your own profit, for what good you do;
Compassion is selfless; to this truth be true.

Verse 3

Take time to be loving with wisdom above;
Will they think they're blessed by how you seek to love?
Love shared is most gracious when we understand;
They want not our pity, just our caring hands.

Verse 4

Take time to be loving, to family and foe;
Think only of strangers as friends you don't know.
Love knows no exclusion, nor fences its field;
Life lived by inclusion reaps a greater yield!

Verse 5

Take time to be loving, the wronged do defend
Pass not the afflicted, to them you are sent
No injury is God's will; no suffering deserved
When we act with mercy, then justice is served.

Verse 6

Take time to be loving, share blessings of joy.
Give congratulations to each girl and boy.
Give praise to the helpful, give thanks to the meek;
We'll find God's own image in them when we seek

Verse 7

Take time to be loving as your first concern.
Think not you're too busy, with no time to burn.
What's more of importance to who you will be:
One bound by your duties, or one who loves free?

Encouragement on the Journey

Postlude

Keep us Lord, by Thy Word

D. Buxtehude

The Meaning of Lent

The word Lent comes from the Anglo-Saxon word, "lincen," meaning spring, and the German word, "Leng," meaning the times when the days are lengthening. Spring is coming and our spirits are rising. To reflect this natural occurrence of the transition from winter to summer spiritually and religiously, Lent foreshadows Christ's resurrection even as flowers and plants will also be "rising." Even as the days are lengthening and becoming sunnier, so may our souls when we penitently look within ourselves to see how we can, through God's grace, become more faithful in loving, forgiving, and making peace in our lives and in the world.

Now from Ash Wednesday to Easter Eve we observe Lent 40 days. The 40 days, excluding Sundays (since every Sunday is a celebration of Easter Day) are symbolic of other important Biblical periods of spiritual reckoning, development, and revelation: the 40 day deluge in Noah's time, Moses' stay on Mt. Sinai while receiving God's Commandments, the 40 years the Israelites spent wandering in the wilderness, Elijah's 40 day fast, and the 40 days of Jesus' temptation and his 40 hours in the tomb. Each of these events were times of spiritual preparation for receiving and implementing the abundance of new life God promised to them as they came to a fuller understanding of God's will and purpose for their lives.

Lent is a season of preparation: preparation for Easter -- a time of joy and victory. Joy is always most exultant, and victory is always sweetest, when they follow on the heels of humility and awareness of sin. Therefore, Lent is a time of self-examination and penitence that is necessary to transform us from a seed to a flower...from the death of the spirit revealed in aimlessness, meaninglessness, and emptiness of purpose to life abundant. In order to prepare ourselves to spiritually celebrate the glory of Easter, we must look at our readiness to celebrate. Therefore, time must be spent in preparing our hearts, minds, bodies, and souls through spiritual disciplines.

Although it may be initially difficult to take time out of our secular schedules, and easy to justify by various excuses why we don't take time in nurturing the spiritual disciplines, we each need to spend time connecting to and developing the sacred within us if we are to reap the spiritual rewards. We need to take time in prayer...time in meditation...time for fasting and 'self'-denial...time for introspection and repentance...time to recognize our need to forgive and to be forgiven...time for Bible study...time for listening to God's plan for our lives...time in service to others...etc.

The decision to spiritually prepare for Easter lies in you alone. God will not force you to prepare and neither will anyone else. But God does offer you a promise -- the promise is that if you are preparing to celebrate Easter, you will know, as you have never known before, what it means to be resurrected with Christ.

--- Bret S. Myers, revised 2/25/2004

Thank you for sharing sacred fellowship with us!

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Faith UCC is an open and affirming church, embracing diversity in our congregation and community, and affirming the dignity and worth of every person. We are an inclusive community of faith that celebrates God's presence through worship and the sharing of God's word. We welcome all persons into the full life and ministry of the church, regardless of race, ethnic background, gender identity, sexual orientation, capability, or circumstance of life.

Liturgist: Sue Cromwell

Organist: Mark Ferraguto

Readers & Lighters:

Lois Bair

Chris, Melissa, Aubrey & Mila Coble

Jeff Donaldson

Rev. Ernest Hawk

Nathan Limbert

Janet Swim

Mary Jane Wild

Get In Touch with Us!

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Church Office Hours: 9:30 a.m. – 1:30 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday & Friday

Please make an appointment with Rev. Myers if you would like to meet with the pastor. You may call the church office, or his cell at 608-370-9472.