

INVITATION TO IMPOSITION OF ASHES

Today we are invited into a time of remembering the transition of Jesus from life to death. Through participating in this act our life in Christ is renewed.

We acknowledge our need today for repentance and are reminded of God's mercy. We are created to experience joy in communion with God, to love one another, and to live in harmony with God's creation. But in our sinfulness we rebel against God, our neighbors, and God's creation. Therefore we do not enjoy the life that our Creator intended for us.

As followers of Christ, we are called to a discipline that invites us to resist whatever leads us away from loving God, neighbor, and God's creation. Lent and the receiving of ashes is one discipline that invites us to resist evil and seek a stronger relationship with God.

Today we begin our Lenten journey. Lent actually began this past Wednesday during what is called Ash Wednesday. Since we cancelled the service on Wednesday evening we are incorporating elements from that service into today's service.

But you know what, I like the idea of beginning every Lenten journey with ashes during Sunday morning worship. We at Allison Creek like to be different. I know of no church that is sharing Ash Wednesday ashes on a Sunday. Makes us rather unique I think. And unique is a good thing.

Lent is 40 days not including Sundays. Sundays are not included in the 40 day count because one is invited to fast for Lent but Sunday is a day to celebrate the resurrection so fasting is not allowed on Sundays.

40 is a number that occurs several times in the Scriptures. In fact, there are 146 times that the number 40 appears in the Bible. The Lord sent rain for 40 days upon the earth while Noah and his family floated in a boat. Elijah fasted for 40 days. Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness while he was tempted. 40 is a biblical number that comes to represent a time of testing and trial.

We don't find Ash Wednesday or Lent in the Bible. But we do find invitations in the Bible to fast and apply ashes to one's head as a sign that you are seeking to repent of behaviors that distance one from God. We heard earlier in the service a reading from Joel that invites us into a time of repentance and mourning.

At this time in the service, we are invited into a time of continuing to confess to God those actions and thoughts and beliefs that keep us from loving God, loving our neighbor, and loving God's creation. You are invited to join in the singing of "Spirit of the Living God" which is printed in the bulletin. You are invited to come forward and receive ashes upon your forehead or on the back of your hand.

As you receive ashes, I will say to you, "you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Now that does not sound like very comforting words. These words come from Genesis 3:19. These are the words spoken by God toward Adam and Eve as they are banished from the Garden of Eden because of their sinfulness.

But we hear these words to remind us that we too are sinful people. We are not God. The world is not about you and the world is not about me. The world and all that is in it is about God. Receiving these ashes and being told that we are dust is to put us in our places if you will. To remind us to focus on God and not on ourselves.

All are invited forward if you wish to receive ashes on your head or on your hand.

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We have been reading through the book of Acts over the past several weeks. The story that Jennifer read is Peter's version of the story that we read last week. The story of how Peter had a dream in which he saw all kinds of foods that his Jewish religion told him were inappropriate for him to eat.

But in this dream he heard God telling him that these foods were now OK for him to eat. And Peter announced after this dream and his encounter with a Gentile that God indeed does not show partiality. Peter announced that God welcomes everyone into God's family, Jew and Gentile alike.

But as we heard Jennifer read, the church leaders in Jerusalem were not pleased with Peter. Peter was criticized by the church leaders for reaching out to non-Jewish people. But Peter did not allow the criticism by a few church leaders to keep him from sharing God's good news to people outside of the Jewish faith.

Peter felt called to share God's good news and he did not care who these people were, where they lived, what they looked like, what they ate. Peter felt called by God's Holy Spirit to share God's good news with people that the church was not connecting to and had no interest in reaching out to.

But Peter felt called to share the good news with people that were not the kind of people that the church leaders wanted to reach out to. But Peter felt a stronger desire to please God rather than anyone else.

So let's read about what happens next:

Acts 11:19-11:26

My colleague Jan Edmiston wrote a recent blog about churches wanting to attract young families to the church. According to Jan, the reasoning behind this includes the following:

Churches need to attract young families because if we don't regenerate, everyone will eventually get old and die.

It's energizing to have young people around.

Younger members can do the work that older members can't or won't do anymore.

Older members tend to be on fixed incomes and younger working members are needed for their money.

Young families (i.e. mom, dad, and kids) remind us of church when we were (or wish we were) part of young families.

Jan then says that there are a few things wrong with this reasoning, including the fact that "attracting" people in general feels manipulative – as if people are "targets" to be used for our own purposes. Yuck. She says.

She then says that we need to be honest about the "why." Are we saying that we want these rare and valuable young families for what they can give to us?

What if, she asks, that instead of trying to manipulate young families to join our club we were instead focused on helping to feed their souls and share authentic community? She says that as a young mom she hoped that the church would provide adults that could help her nurture her children. She always wanted to know that if her kids had a problem that they would have other trustworthy adults to whom they could go to.

Jan then says this in her blog. She says, “Young families are great. Old families are great. Families made up of child-free couples are great. Families of single people are great. Imagine if every church simply wanted to bring In Broken People. Now that’s a church.

If we look to Acts as our guide as to how God wants to grow this church, then there is something that we can learn from this morning’s reading. And that learning from today’s Scripture is this. For the church to grow, we must reach out to people that are different than us.

The Christian church grew as the disciples began to reach out to people that practiced different rituals and beliefs. We at Allison Creek cannot be the church that we were 50 years ago, 10 years ago, or even 5 years ago and expect to be a faithful church. The church in Acts reached out to people that were not like them and they began to adapt to the changing culture around them.

That is our challenge here at Allison Creek as well. We cannot do things the way we have always done them and expect to be a faithful and growing church. What’s that quote about lunacy. Lunacy is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting to see a different result?

So, according to Acts, for the church to grow, the church must be willing to reach out to people unlike us.

Why do we do this? Because the Bible tells us so. And did you notice what happened as a result of the church reaching out to people that were unlike them? Did you see what this diverse group of believers were now called? Acts tells us that as the church becomes diverse then these disciples are now called Christians for the first time.

I know that some folks like to try to give something up for Lent. After reading this Scripture I want to put something out there for us to attempt to give up. I invite us to give up our desire to make the church look like and act like what we think the church looked like in the past.

And to instead be open to God's Holy Spirit who may be calling us into being a church that looks somewhat different than what it used to look like. The church we are being called into may mean that we are being called into developing different relationships.

The church we are being called into may mean a place where worship continues to evolve into something new and different. The church we are being called into may mean a place where diverse ages and people come together and encounter God in a way that may be different than anything any of us have ever experienced before.

For some, looking toward the future may be kind of scary. But if we keep reading the stories in the Bible like what we find in Acts we may find that God is always in control if we just trust God and follow God. AMEN.

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- Edmiston, Jan, <https://achurchforstarvingartists.wordpress.com/>

-Given: Feb. 22, 2015 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)