

All around the world, for the past several weeks, pastors have been trying to figure out Ash Wednesday. How can we apply ashes in a safe, responsible manner this year? Well, you saw what we came up with, and we don't claim that it's perfect. We'd rather apply ashes in the traditional old way, of course. So this is just one more of many little disappointments brought about by the pandemic.

There's something very moving and inspirational about participating in the ancient Ash Wednesday custom. In every other year, we come forward quietly, as part of the order of confession and forgiveness. One by one, the pastor makes the mark of the holy cross with ashes on our foreheads. It reminds us of our own mortality, and it's a symbol of our sorrow over our sin.

Of all the liturgies and rituals of the church, the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday is one of the most personal, and most dramatic. So this (mask) isn't quite the same, is it? And, for those who received ashes out there in the narthex, it may not have had quite the same impact. Let's just acknowledge that up front.

But here's the thing. Getting ashes on Ash Wednesday is just a tradition. A good tradition, a salutary one; but not a sacrament, commanded by Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. Ashes are not a real means of grace, like Baptism or Holy Communion.

In a pandemic year, we've had to change our Ash Wednesday custom for health and safety reasons, but that's OK. We're not disobeying a clear command of God with this (mask). We're not diluting any Scriptural mandates today. In the end, the tradition of putting ashes on our heads is just a

reminder, only an outward symbol, of something that our God wants to be very real on the inside.

What the Lord is really looking for from his people on this solemn day is more than a tradition. It's something way more significant than a custom. What God wants to see in you today, and in me, is real repentance.

Real repentance: you can't fake it, you can't pretend it, you can't act it out. Real repentance is something only God can see. Only God can look into your heart and judge the sincerity of your repentance. Only God can tell if you are truly sorry for your sins, for your disobedience and infidelity, today.

What is repentance? It's not a ritual we go through once a year. It's not merely reading off words on a weekly basis from a confessional liturgy here at church. Repentance is a heart-felt regret, a genuine renouncement of our sins.

Sin is an ever-present part of our lives, isn't it? Sin has a constant hold on us. Sin damages our relationships, degrades our interactions, creates unnecessary barriers between people. Our sins of word, deed, and thought steer us away from God, put rebellion in our hearts, lead us to follow selfish and ungodly pursuits.

Sin is so much a part of our lives that we can't help taking it lightly sometimes. We become familiar, even comfortable, with certain sins, don't we? Sin is the baggage that we all carry around day by day as humans. And we may try to drop that baggage at the door when we come into church. But we all tend to pick it right back up again when we leave.

That sin is harmful, though. It's explosive, and destructive. It wreaks havoc in our human lives, and it does eternal damage to our relationship with our Maker.

Being here tonight is a step in the right direction. Wearing the mark of the ashes, however they're applied, is a healthy tradition. But what God really wants from his people today is real repentance.

Real repentance is a change of mind, a change of thinking. To repent is to realize, "My sin is not OK. My sins may be familiar and comfortable, but they're not acceptable." Repentance is the recognition that we're heading in the wrong direction, and that we need God's help.

Friends, we desperately need God's intervention to turn our sin-filled lives around. I need that help. Do you need God's help? We can nod. We can say the words. We can smear ashes on our heads. But what God really wants from his people today is in our hearts. It's deep down in our souls, real repentance.

The words of the prophet Joel come ringing through the centuries, calling us today to repent: "Yet even now," declares the Lord, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.' Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster."

Today we return to the Lord, with the help of God's mercy and love. Real repentance.

Today we pray, from our hearts, that God will assist us to change our minds, and help us to amend our lives. Real repentance.

Today we put aside our pride, we lay down our pretense, we admit the reality of who we are. Today we stop counting our outward appearances and ritual actions as righteousness, and we look to God alone for mercy. Real repentance.

Today we begin our Lenten journey to the cross. For the next five weeks, we'll walk the reality road with Jesus toward Calvary. And, yes, this season of Lent is another human tradition; but it's a good one. Because it's only through faith in Christ's suffering and death on our behalf that sinners receive forgiveness. It's only Jesus who saves us. It's only by bringing our sins to the cross that we can know real mercy, real grace, real repentance.

“Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.” May your real repentance lead you to return to the Lord, to the cross, to Jesus Christ your only Savior. Amen.