

Ash Wednesday – 2026
Joel 2:12-19
2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Is it easier for you to be humble while you are in the company of humble people? Humility isn't the only virtue. Is it easier for you to be courageous, generous, kind, and faithful when you are in the company of courageous, generous, kind and faithful people? What do you think of all these other people sitting in this holy house with you? Here's an interesting line from the book of Acts: "Now when [the religious authorities] saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13). What kind of person would you be if you were Jesus' wingman 24/7? Would any of His virtue "rub off" on you?

What about the converse? Is it easier to be a dirtbag if you hang around with other dirtbags? Since "dirtbag" is not a theological term, let's get specific. Is it easier for you to be greedy, profane, hypocritical, and idolatrous if you hang out with greedy, profane, hypocritical and idolatrous people? Scripture says that "Bad company ruins good morals." That line is actually from a pagan poet whom St. Paul quotes in order to shame the Corinthian church. The Christians in Corinth had begun to flirt with hedonism, and the consequence was to defile what God had made holy. Here's the full quote from Paul: "Stop being deceived: Evil associations corrupt good habits" (1 Corinthians 15:33). Paul is commanding them to stop actions that have already begun to happen. Their self-deception that flirting with the world carried no ill repercussions is what needed to stop. Does that apply to us?

Most of you know that I was a juvenile delinquent. One question that pesters me is at what point did I switch from one who was corrupted by others to me being a corrupter of others. I can't pinpoint the exact moment, but I know that I made the transition. The Lord's words on this score are sharp: "Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptations come!" (Matthew 18:7). Have you taught others to lie? I suspect that you have. Perhaps not on a chalkboard, but by lying you've modeled it for others. When confronted by some ill behavior, the sinner's first reaction is to lie, or deny, or excuse, or deflect. I also suspect that you've learned to tell the truth in difficult situations. When did you learn that? How did you learn that? After King David was exposed by Nathan the prophet for his crimes of adultery and murder, David penned Psalm 51. Here's an Ash Wednesday line from Psalm 51: "Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being" (Psalm 51:6). What is that? What is "truth in the inward being?"

Ash Wednesday may be viewed as performative religious hokum by some. For us this day is a treasure. Truth in the inward being – that is our pursuit. God knows us. God sees our heart. There is no deceiving Him. We are transparent, open. Repentance is real. Our faith drives us to honesty to the full. Mere external religious rituals are vain. We are here to be real. Our sin is real. Our culpability is real. Our death is real. There are those we have hurt. There are those we have failed to help. Our prayers have faltered, our fidelity to Christ has faltered, our love for our neighbor has faltered. We don't pretend. This isn't a dress-up game. We are here to rend our hearts and not our garments (Joel 2:13). False answers to brutal spiritual truths that stare at

us in the mirror are legion. Cosmetics and fashion, the raw nastiness on streaming services, the dark corners of social media, the narcissism of consumerism and the idolatry implicit to our political discourse – people want to evade uncompromising spiritual truths that convict them and the various escape hatches are conveniently at your fingertips. These various escape hatches are counterproductive self-medication.

Lent is a corrective. Coming to grips with our mortality is a corrective. Who will be there when you die? Sin is likened to gangrene. Cut off the diseased, dead flesh or risk the whole body being placed in a fancy box with no escape hatch. Sin is also likened to yeast. Here's the nexus of Lent: "Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Corinthians 5:6-8). Yeast is alive. Sin is yeast. Sin manifests itself in various ways, but it is definitely in you. Repentance is the truthful admission that sin is alive in you (and turning from it, in all its forms). Selfishness, lust, covetousness, pride – it is to be cast out. It takes awareness. It takes effort. Most of all, it takes honesty.

We are, by Christ's blood, *unleavened*. He did the work that we could not do. He took our place. As true man, He took our place. He stood beneath our sentence. Ironically, Pontius Pilate spoke the truth: "I find no guilt in this man" (Luke 23:4). And still Jesus was crucified. The Lord of glory became the receptacle for human disease, human filth, human death. And like diseased flesh, the Son of God was cut off from among the living (Isaiah 53:8). I find no guilt in this man. That was the truth. It was our guilt that was on Him. His blood poured from holy wounds. The blood of God's Son turned the desert of our death into a stream of living water, heavenly water, paradise and streams of grace flowed from His hands, His feet, His side (Isaiah 35:6-7). Truth in the inmost parts came flowing from the body of Christ of King on Good Friday. It is finished! Christ's sacrifice made you a lump of unleavened faith, hope, and love. His sacrifice doesn't just "rub off." His death and resurrection has recreated you, reclaimed you for the Father, made you holy, made you just, made you like Him (Romans 1:16-17; Galatians 2:20). Jesus called Himself the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). That is what is in you. Truth in the inmost part is the crucified and risen Savior dwelling in your soul, steering your life, leading you in the Way.

What are you now? You are an ally to other human beings. For your Lord, you love and bless and sacrifice yourself for other human beings. We will repent. The whole of our lives is one of repentance. I want to be done with corrupting others. I want to be a defender of the truth, a defender of what is good, a defender of life. At some point, death will come to us. We are dust and to dust we shall return. Our mortality has hope at its core. Who will be there? When you die, who will be there? There is a divinely constructed tether between these two statements: You are dust and to dust you shall return AND return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful (Genesis 3:19; Joel 2:13). He is the one who creates in you a clean heart (Psalm 51:10). He is the One who accomplishes your return to paradise (Luke 23:43). He is the one who sacrificed His Son so that you might live (John 3:16). The sign of your *mortality* is on your brow. The sign of your *return* is on your brow. It is God's design – that cross; God's love; God's victory. Tonight, you eat the food of return. The unleavened bread of Christ's body is your return. The wine of His blood is your return. Forgiveness is your return. Who will be there

when you die? Christ the King – He will be there. He is with you now. With His redeeming love, He is with you always.