

Through the Dust: From Self Destruction to Living

Matthew 16:24

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This being the first sermon of Lent, the task before me is to share with you the broad strokes of the direction for Lent 2018.

Lent is a Christian season prior to Easter where Christians prepare for Easter. In our small way model our lives to imitate his sacrifice. Lent starts on Ash Wednesday, this past Wednesday and last six weeks, until Easter.

Lent is a journey, in the broadest way it is a journey from selfishness to selflessness, it is a journey that is both inward and outward. It lasts 40 days, reminding us of the 40 days Jesus faced temptation as recorded in the gospels. While Lent begins with repentance and urges it throughout, it should not be forgotten that Lent is about preparation. It is a getting ready, and repentance is just one thing we Christians do to be prepared.

You have possibly heard people “give up something for Lent.” This is not repentance, but it is a step along the journey. It is a method of preparation. Often we use Lent to give up something that aids with our health or something that is really tempting. People give up chocolate, alcohol, or speeding. You will almost always meet someone during Lent who says they are giving up brussels sprouts or broccoli, in other words, they are giving up something that is meaningless to them.

In Matthew 16:24 it is written, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Part of the denying ourselves is to “give up something” or to reform ourselves.

So if Lent is a journey, and if part of the journey is in the letting go of things, attitudes, and behaviors which separate us from God’s way then maybe we should move away from the kitchen and try to give up something that influences us more than potato chips.

In light of this listen anew to Jesus’ words earlier in Matthew’s gospel—

“If your right eye causes you to sin tear it out . . . and if your right-hand causes you to sin cut it off.” No one I know—takes these verses literally or there would be a lot more folks wearing eye patches. We read the bible with seriousness instead of literally which means when we encounter these pieces of scripture we have to do a bit of thinking.

Of course, many people only read the bible like children asking the question----“ is this a fact”, “did Jesus say this?” But here we have an opportunity to ask a richer question-----why cut it off? Is it true that things which are destructive to our spirit and life must be removed, or can they stay? Jesus is pointing us not toward surgery but toward change. Anything that threatens our spiritual well-being must be exiled. It should not come to cutting off your hand, but by saying you must cut off your hand, Jesus is saying this is serious business. I think this is called hyperbole.

If you are smoking—it’s destroying your lungs, quit smoking, cut it off. If you are addicted to pornography then stop or quit.

We operate on this “cut it off, get rid of it” principle in our lives. If skin cancer appears on our body the doctor will cut it out, so it does not affect our whole body. The exiling is necessary, without it we lose our way.

So as we journey through Lent this year maybe we need to give up something bad. Stop using Lent as an opportunity for dieting. Stop using Lent as an opportunity to develop a new habit. Let’s use lent to examine ourselves, see what makes us weaker followers of Jesus, and then let’s cut it off, move away from it, or change directions.

The larger title for this series of worship services is--- “Through the dust.” The cup of Christ is not gold, it is clay, Jesus says to deny yourself not indulge yourself, and our journey is not a Carnival Cruise it is pilgrimage through the dust. The weekly installments will take the pattern of a journey, “ From _____ to _____. It is a recognition we are in one place but God is calling us to another place. A closer place. The journey is from Guilt to Freedom, Hypocrisy to Authentic, Judgement to Respect, and Vices to Virtue. We are not standing still—we are journeying with Jesus to the promise land and we must move from the places and ways that are destructive to the places and behaviors that infuse our lives with satisfaction.

While this message introduces the entire journey we are also taking our first steps today. We are moving from Apathy, Discouragement, and bitterness to being alive. Apathy, discouragement, and bitterness are the un-holy trinity that robs us of life.

There is a Russian novel, Oblonov, which illustrates well the destructive forces of apathy. Of not caring. In the first 50 pages of the novel, the primary character Oblonov moves from the bed to a chair. In the next 50 pages, he turns the chair

around. One hundred pages in and he is still in the bedroom. He no longer cares, unkept hair and bedroom slippers are his future. In the book of Revelation apathy is described this way “you are neither hot or cold.” We are not close enough to God to share the warmth and we are not far enough away to feel enough cold to do something about it. We are in no man's land. Luke warm water neither kills germs or refreshes the spirit, it's good for nothing, we spit it out. This is apathy, it robs us of the thrill of living.

Discouragement is not seeing the glass half-empty, that's pessimism, discouragement is saying “why bother drinking, you'll be thirsty again in no time.” Winnie the Pooh greets Eeyore with “Good Morning,” Eeyore replies, “if it is a good morning, which I doubt.” On another occasion, Pooh says, “Fine morning isn't it,” to which Eeyore replies, “Wish I could say yes, but I can't.” When your body begins to fail you or your marriage is rocky or your kids are driving you crazy discouragement is natural, it is the standard response. Discouragement can suck the joy out of the best of days or push away the best of friends.

For an example of bitterness we turn to Hannah, mother of Samuel, she was sorely provoked every year by Peninnah, the second wife of her husband. Peninnah had children and purposely tried to make Hannah feel badly because she had no children. After years of Peninnah doing this, Hannah has become bitter, not eating well and feeling that she somehow was not blessed by the Lord, took her bitterness to the Lord in desperate prayer.

Hannah was bitter, but instead of hiding it from God, as if that is possible, she finally took it to God. She would not allow the bitterness to keep her away any longer, she turned into God.

When we are trapped in apathy, overwhelmed by disappointment and stuck in bitterness we are killing ourselves. The journey of Lent is to stop killing ourselves and live for Christ.

During Lent we turn into God with our broken spirit and our bad attitudes, we start living. The first step to living and the first step away from the un-holy trinity is to take a step toward God.

In this journey thru the dust, we accept and admit there is disappointment, apathy, and bitterness in our past. But we are choosing to Live, to journey toward God, to walk the ironic path thru the dust to the transformation of the cross—

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” By dying to ourselves we truly come to life.