

**“Confronting Our Frailty and Sin”**  
**Joel 2:1, 12-14, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**  
**Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman**  
**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**  
**February 26, 2020**

We may not think that we are very bold in our witness, but by attending this service this evening we are making a radical statement that goes against the grain of our culture. This is a service that invites us to focus on our frailty and sin, and we live in a culture that tries to deny both of these realities every way it can.

In his book *Being Mortal* Atul Gawande addresses our aversion to talking about finitude. Because we have found treatments for many illnesses and live in relative peace, we are able to shield ourselves from death and thus avoid thinking about our mortality. Even medical practice struggles with the unavoidable reality of dying. It’s why Hospice began. Professionals trained to help people get well struggle when the focus shifts to helping people die.

It has been almost half a century since psychiatrist Karl Menninger wrote his insightful book *Whatever Became of Sin?* But the realities he documented, the detrimental effects of doing away with the concept of sin, have become more and more pronounced. We have lost our moral compass as a nation because we have denied the realities of evil and sin.

We don’t even want to think about frailty and sin, but they are unavoidable realities, two things we all have in common. And by seeking to avoid them, we only give them more power. It is much healthier to confront them directly and the good news is our faith provides a way for us to do so.

The purpose of this service is to create liturgical space for us to acknowledge our frailty and sin. In a sense, the whole season of Lent creates such space, but it all begins with this service where we impose ashes, visible reminders that we are dust.

In a recent issue of *The Christian Century* Lutheran pastor Amy Zietlow explains the purpose of the ashes in a helpful way. She talks about the rosin that is used to help ballet dancers avoid slipping. Pointe

shoes, she says, were invented in 1795 by Charles Didelot and they help ballet dancers defy gravity and keep *en pointe*. But they can also be very slippery. So, a refined dust made of crystalized tree sap is applied to them to keep dancers from falling on their faces.

In like manner, she says, the dust of Ash Wednesday keeps us from falling on our faces spiritually by disrupting our illusions of grandeur, permanence and indispensability. Left to our own devices, we might give in to arrogance, but the ashes keep us grounded. We are not immortal, we are dust. This service helps us remember this.

So, we have this liturgical space to acknowledge our weaknesses and limitations, and we have the company of fellow believers who are wise enough, foolish enough or humble enough to join us. But we need more than liturgy and companionship to confront our mortality and sin. We need an assurance that there is a path to something beyond our struggle, a way to forgiveness and healing, a reason for hope. And again, our faith provides for our need through something we call grace.

It is the key distinctive of Christian faith. We are not simply sinners who deserve judgment but forgiven sinners whom God embraces in love. Any approach to faith that focuses only on how bad we are distorts the Gospel. Only with the assurance of grace are we able to confront the deeper, darker issues in our lives, and until we address them, we are simply playing at faith.

Most people know they are sinners. The critical insight is that there is a way to healing and that way is grace. This truth is proclaimed throughout scripture and symbolized by the ashes we impose. The ashes themselves represent our frailty and sin, our mortality and culpability. From dust we have come and to dust we will return, says Genesis 3:19. But these ashes are imposed in the shape of a cross and this reminds us that God transforms death into life, suffering into joy, despair into hope.

And so, we have this liturgical space, this season of reflection to confront our weaknesses and limitations, and we have the assurance of grace to encourage us. All that remains is to face our needs and do something about them. The purpose of Ash Wednesday and Lent is not simply to make us feel sadness and remorse but to point us in the direction of change and thus free us to live more peaceful lives. “Rend

your hearts and not your garments,” says the prophet Joel, “Return to the Lord, your God.” The invitation is to action, change, transformation.

I received an interesting email a couple of weeks ago from a man who claimed that his father’s cousin had made a gift to our church in memory of the caller’s uncle and said there was a story behind that gift that I might want to hear. He said no more about the matter but simply left his phone number in the hope that I might call.

Given the array of strange things that are attempted through emails these days, I first checked with Jodi in our financial office to confirm that a gift had been made. It had been, and she remembered the man who made it - a ninety-nine-year-old living in Winston-Salem who remembered sitting on the front steps of our sanctuary when he was a young boy many years ago with his cousin. But he didn’t explain the motivation for his gift, other than to say it was in memory of his cousin.

So, I got in touch with the man who sent me the email and he told me the story. His father’s cousin was going through his boxes of stuff recently and came across an envelope that stirred some memories. It was an old envelope that was part of a stamp collection. His cousin had given it to him years ago with a number of stamps but asked him to give the envelope back. He had refused, he still had the envelope, and suddenly he felt guilty for having held on to it.

He couldn’t give it back to his cousin because he was no longer alive. So, he decided to see what it was worth. Originally it was worth 50 cents. But when he talked to a stamp collector, he found out it is now worth over \$1,100. At this point, he began to feel really guilty. So, he sold the envelope for a competitive price and donated roughly half of the proceeds to this church that his cousin attended in memory of him.

Now, the point is to not to require a financial gift to the church to assure forgiveness, though the church has a long history of doing just that. Guilt is a powerful motivator and manipulator. The point is that this man recognized something about his condition that he knew was not right, he did something about it, and now he feels a sense of peace.

It may seem like St. Augustine’s confession of having stolen a pear when he was young, an issue destined for Small Claims Court in the Judicial Branch of the Divine. Augustine makes a case that this small

transgression carried more weight because he didn't even eat the pear, he stole it out of meanness and a desire to transgress. But it still seems like a small matter compared to other things we know about him. This is a man who sowed his wild oats so much that the prayer of his adolescence might have been, "Lord, make me chaste, but not yet."

All our donor did was hold on to an envelope that his cousin wanted back. Was it a big deal to his cousin? Is this the weightiest concern in his life? But little things matter. The spirit of wrongdoing is important. Augustine was right. And all we can do is name the issues we recognize and deal with them. That's the purpose of this season – to recognize the most needful places in our lives and do something, in the context of grace, to address them.

It might be something we do like stealing a pear or holding on to an envelope, anything we know in our hearts is wrong. It might be something we fail to do like making time to pray or giving more to others; as the reading from Matthew reminds us, almsgiving and prayer are on Jesus' shortlist of important faith practices. It might be an attitude which distorts the image of God within us – an attitude of anger or jealousy, selfishness or revenge. But whatever holds us back, whatever chokes the work of the Spirit, we are called to address.

That's what we are about this evening and that's what it means to keep a holy Lent. It may be countercultural, but it is healthy and redemptive, and it is done with an assurance of mercy and love.