

14 February 2018  
Ash Wednesday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church

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“Return to the Lord We Know”

Text: Joel 2:12-19; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

***Return to me***, the lover says to his beloved who has left him. ***Return to me***. I love you still. I want you back.

On a day like Valentine’s Day, we might expect to hear such words. Except these words are not from a man or a woman, but from God Himself. ***Return to me***, come back to me. I do not reject you.

What good news that is! Because rejected is exactly what we deserve. Think of the confession we said earlier - all the *times* we sin, all the *kinds* of sin, all the *ways* we sin, and maybe worst of all, how cavalier we can be about sin. Like it’s really not all that important. Or, that it really doesn’t matter that we do not listen to God’s Word and do what we want anyway. We think that, until sin or the consequences of sin - our sins or others’ sins - come crashing down on us. And then we see. And then how often do we shake our fist at God and ask how He could let this happen . . . as if it’s *His* fault! We’re sinful messes, are we not?

Yet still God calls to us. ***Return to me***. Repent of all that. Turn away from all that and ***return - to me***. He wants us sinful messes back. His love for us remains. Wonderful words.

But there were other words we heard tonight, also from the prophet Joel, that seem, well, not so wonderful. Those words were: *Who knows? Who knows whether he will turn and relent . . . ?*

Those can be monstrous words! Words of uncertainty. Word that devour. Words that plague. Words that offer no comfort at all. For consider these examples . . .

Does your spouse love you? *Who knows?* Is your child going to come out of surgery? *Who knows?* Is that wildfire or tornado or hurricane or flood going to reach our house? *Who knows?* And tonight from Joel: ***Return to the Lord***, but ***who knows whether he will turn and relent . . .*** Does that mean: *Who knows whether God will forgive you?*

Because that's what it sounds like, doesn't it? *Who knows* whether God will forgive?

But that's not what those words mean there. Would the God who is calling us back to Himself and not rejecting us do so with an uncertain forgiveness? Maybe He will, but maybe He won't - you just don't know? **No!** He has promised us forgiveness, He has promised us a Saviour.

Listen to these verses, all from the psalms, the prayerbook of the Bible. Do they sound like *who knows*?

*I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin* (Psalm 32:5).

*When iniquities prevail against me, you atone for our transgressions* (Psalm 65:3).

*As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us* (Psalm 103:12).

And then what we heard tonight from Paul: ***For our sake he*** [God the Father] ***made him*** [Jesus] ***to be sin who knew no sin***, - to be our sin offering - ***so that in him*** [Jesus] ***we might become the righteousness of God.***

Our sin offering has been lifted high upon the cross for all creation to see. Yes, our sins make a mess of things, but here, in this way, God is setting us right again. In His Son. Through the blood of His Son. **You are forgiven.** And to that the catechism says: *This is most certainly true.* This truth, the promise of the forgiveness of sins in Jesus, is the most certain truth we have on this earth.

So what do those words mean, then? Joel's *who knows*? He is talking about the hunger and famine the people are experiencing. That might not end, Joel is saying. The forgiveness of the Lord is sure, but His discipline may continue. Not to punish but to teach. Not to push you away, but to draw you closer. Not to put you down, but to lift you up. All this, just like His forgiveness, is from His love. Though it may not feel like it or seem like it. He will end it at the proper time . . . but that time may not be now.

So forgiveness isn't a guarantee that life will be good or easy. In fact, it may be just the opposite! That is what we do not know. Faith, forgiveness? Yes! Life? *Who knows*? Paul talked about all those things that happened to the apostles, including riots, beatings, dishonor, and much more. But through it all, they were preaching the Word of God, proclaiming His promise of forgiveness, and imploring all people to ***be reconciled to God, to return to the Lord.*** Even if the trials and struggles continue . . .

No, *especially* if they do! For that is what they are for - that we learn to rely not on

ourselves, but on God and His love, forgiveness, strength, and faithfulness. To drive us into the Word, into prayer, *into weakness*, to receive the love and life of Christ.

And that is also what prayer, fasting, and almsgiving is for. Why do we do those things, and especially during this season of Lent? To receive favor from God? No, you already have that. To receive favor from men? If so, that favor is your wage; you have received what you wanted. But really, we do those things that we may learn from them.

We **fast** to learn that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. We **pray** to learn to stop trying to control everything ourselves and let the Lord work His good, and in His way and time. And we **give** that we may learn to love our neighbor and not our stuff, and learn to rely on the Lord who will provide for us.

Prayer, fasting, and almsgiving does not turn “*who knows?*” into certainty. For who knows whether our prayers, our fasting, and our almsgiving is good enough anyway? Actually, we know - *it's not!* Even our best acts are tainted with pride or wicked thoughts or the desire for recognition.

No, when “who knows?” rears its ugly head, when uncertainty fills our hearts and minds, when it perhaps seems that the Lord does not see or does not care, nothing we do will change that; can change that. We rely instead on the Word of the Lord and what He has told us about Himself, that ***He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.***

And so the call goes out every Lenten season to ***return to the Lord.*** To repent. To turn away from our sin and return to Him. And the call goes out to the elderly, children, nursing infants, brides, bridegrooms, priests, *everyone*. No one excepted. Not that we return to the Lord *only* during this season, but that we use this season as a season of change, that maybe the learning we do here and now, grow and last all through the year. That we grow in faith, in His Word, in repentance, in confidence, in grace, and that these roots then bear good fruit in our lives all the year.

That whether we have good times or difficult times, times of plenty or times of want, when we seemed showered with blessing or in a time of drought, we not waver, but remain confident in the Lord and in His love and forgiveness, signed, sealed, and delivered by the blood of the Lamb shed for you, and tonight, again, poured into you.

So it's kind of cool that Ash Wednesday falls on Valentine's Day this year - or maybe it's the other way around! - that Valentine's Day fall on Ash Wednesday. Either way, our focus is on love - tonight, here, the love of God for poor, miserable, fallen, wretched sinners like you and me. That we be lost and condemned creatures no more.

So tonight we repent, yes, but even more we *rejoice*. In His love that would cause Him to send His Son for you. In His love that would call you to repentance time and time again. In His love that adopts you as His sons and daughters. In His love that provides you with a Church, with His Word, and with His gifts. And in a love that won't stop. Can't stop. Our love, we know, runs hot and cold, but not your Father's love for you.

So we *Return to the Lord, your God,*  
*for* [we know! that] *he is gracious and merciful,*  
*slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.*

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.