

Recently, someone asked me an important question, a question that is such a common one that I have heard it come up even in discussion with seminary students. It seems like a great question to consider on Ash Wednesday.

Here it is:

Do we have to follow the 10 commandments to be Christians?

Do we have to keep each Commandment to be saved? To follow Jesus and live on with Him after we die?

Well, thank God, we can answer is no. It is not our following the 10 commandments, our own works, that save us because none of us can faithfully keep each commandment, nor does God require us to for salvation. Instead, it is God's work that saves us. It is our faith in Jesus's death and resurrection that makes us Christians; it is our faith through the grace of God that saves us. And I bring this up because it is such a common question.

So, if you end up in my situation and someone asks you what makes us Christians, what saves us? Let them know it is by God's gift of faith, believing in Jesus, God's only Son, our Lord, who died and rose again and forgives us all of our sins.

Now, we'll come back to that question about the 10 commandments, but it raises another issue. Forgiveness of sins means repenting of sins. How does that repentance work exactly?

In the wider culture, we may be familiar with churches and Christian groups that encourage people to say what is called the sinner's prayer. Repenting, in this view, can seem like a one-time event, being born-again in Christ by asking Jesus into your heart.

Now, don't get me wrong. I do not want to criticize praying to ask God to forgive us of our sins and to save us through Christ.

But repenting and salvation is so much more than a once in a lifetime event of praying for forgiveness. Repentance is a continual process of God at work in us and us returning to God.

Everyday we receive fresh mercy and grace from God. Repenting and being renewed in Christ is a daily reality.

And tonight, on Ash Wednesday, is the perfect time to get more deeply into our repentance and God's saving work in us.

We get a picture of God's saving work in today's Old Testament reading from Joel.

The prophet Joel says to gather an assembly of all God's people, the young and the old, to come together before God and repent. And similar to these people who gathered together thousands of years ago, here we are, in community tonight for Ash Wednesday.

Through Joel, God says, "Return to me with all your heart. Rend your hearts, not your clothing."

God's emphasis, even back in time before Jesus's life on earth, is on the faith of each person, not on the outward signs of their faith, their good deeds, the sacrifices mentioned in today's Psalm, or even in following of the 10 commandments. Even before Jesus walked the earth, the Triune God is at work in the world, asking for the faith of His people.

And God says to us tonight, it is the faith in your heart that matters. Let your heart break over the distance between us and come back to me, the one who created you and loves you.

And that tells us, that what is in our hearts matters, and that there are things within each of us that separate us from God so much, that God reminds us to return to Him each day.

PAGE THREE: WHAT SEPERATES US FROM GOD

What is it that is keeping you from a closer relationship with God? From remembering God in your daily life? What parts of your life are separated from God?

Back in February, I attended a workshop on worship, and there were both clergy present and also many members of churches who volunteered in some leadership capacity like teaching or worship planning, or music, and then also members who were just curious and wanted to learn more.

We were asked what brings you back to worship God on Sundays? What brings you back to church?

One of the people there said something that deeply touched each of us in the room.

This person said, “I come to worship each week because when I am out in the world at my job, going to my kid’s school, and just living life, it feels like everything is trying to pull me away from God. There is so much going on at my job that I forget God. I forget who God is and who I am, who I really belong to. So, I come back to church to remember who God is and who I am.”

And that cut me because I could feel the truth in it. The room was silent for quite a long moment as those words about the world pulling us away from God echoed as a truth within each of us. I thought about how I work here at Advent, and even working in the church, you still feel that pull away from God, that temptation to do your work purely out of your own skills and talents, instead of working from God’s strength. And when I go home, I know I have the temptation to fall asleep without praying, or to pay more attention to my own selfishness, instead of God’s great love.

There are so many things out there competing for our attention. And so many things in here, within us, distracting us.

We are each of us pulled away from God by the way our culture works, by the way sin is so prevalent within each of us, and by the systems of sins, like greed and prejudice, that shape our wider American culture.

This is why in so much of the Bible—Old and New Testament—that God says “return to me, remember me.”. The way sin works in us and separates us from God, the way we forget who God is and what God does for us, is why we are saved by Jesus’s death on

the cross and resurrection, saved by faith, not saved by keeping the 10 commandments or doing good deeds.

And don't get me wrong—the choices we make do matter. They matter deeply, or we wouldn't be here tonight. Our choices of how to spend our time, our money, and our attention shape who we are and who we are becoming. Our choices shape our relationships with others. They just don't save us. Jesus does.

So, tonight, return to God with all of your heart. Let the ways that you have missed the mark, or failed, and the sins you have committed not fill you with shame—no shame—because we are all in this together, all sinners, but let those missing pieces motivate you toward God's love and toward freedom through God's great mercy.

Remember, God says, Return to me with all your heart.

And the prophet Joel, in tonight's reading, follows up God's request for us to return to him with this everlasting, great truth:

God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and full to overflowing with constant, unending love.

Tonight, as you come up to receive ashes, and you hear, "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return." Listen to the deeper message God is speaking to you in those words,

"Remember you are mine and return to me."

And let that moment in your journey of faith, guide you into this season of Lent. A time where we can really remember how God asks us to return to him every day. As the world, your daily life, the things that you do, pull you away from God, return each day. For you are saved, secure in Christ and God is renewing you each day through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Remember you are mine and return to me.

Tonight, and each day of Lent say back to God,

Lord, I remember I am yours, and I return to you.

Amen.

Advent Lutheran Church