

**“Then I Acknowledged”**  
**Matthew 4:1-11; Psalm 32:1-11**  
**Lent 1**

**Matthew 4:1-11**

<sup>1</sup>Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup>He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

<sup>3</sup>The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” <sup>4</sup>But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

<sup>5</sup>Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, <sup>6</sup>saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” <sup>7</sup>Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

<sup>8</sup>Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; <sup>9</sup>and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” <sup>10</sup>Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

<sup>11</sup>Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

**Psalm 32:1-11**

<sup>1</sup>Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,  
whose sin is covered.

<sup>2</sup>Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,  
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

<sup>3</sup>While I kept silence,  
my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.

<sup>4</sup>For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;  
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

<sup>5</sup>Then I acknowledged my sin to you,  
and I did not hide my iniquity;  
I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,”  
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

<sup>6</sup>Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you;  
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.

<sup>7</sup>You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble;  
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

<sup>8</sup>I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;  
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

<sup>9</sup>Do not be like a horse or a mule,  
without understanding,  
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,  
else it will not stay near you.

<sup>10</sup>Many are the torments of the wicked,  
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.

<sup>11</sup>Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous,  
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

### Prayer for the First Sunday in Lent

Help us, O God, we pray,  
to remember who we are, and what we are.

At Ash Wednesday, we are reminded that we are dust,  
and to dust we shall return.

And yet as the psalmist has observed,  
you have made us only a little lower than yourself,  
and crowned humble humanity with glory and honor.<sup>i</sup>

Always we are tempted  
to think either more or less of ourselves  
than we really are.

Help us not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think.<sup>ii</sup>

when we see that even the Son of God,  
even after his baptism, but before he could begin  
the work in the world for which you sent him,  
in a plane of the highest spiritual discipline  
and a state of absolute physical emptiness and hunger,

had to face down  
the temptations of taking available but unfaithful shortcuts  
to security and safety,  
the temptation to reveal himself by spectacles and glory,  
rather than love of God and service to humanity,  
the temptation to have everything a human could dream of possessing  
rather than embracing the demands of a life of discipleship.

And help us not to expect less of ourselves than we ought to expect.

As Marianne Williamson has said,

“[We are children] of God. [Our] playing small does not serve the world... We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.”<sup>iii</sup>

Help us, O God, to know again what it is to be who we were made to be. Amen.

### The Sermon

Two four-year-old boys in Louisville, Kentucky made a lot of people smile this week: their names are Jax and Reddy, and they're best buddies at their pre-school.

Jax had flaxen blond hair, and Reddy had a buzz cut. So Jax decided he wanted to get a buzz cut too, so he would look just like Reddy. In fact, their plan was to make it impossible for their preschool teacher to tell them apart,<sup>iv</sup> so they figured that by getting the exact same haircut, they would be entirely indistinguishable from each other.

Jax, by the way, is white, and Reddy is African American, and as far as either of those young best friends knew, other than the hair, they look exactly the same.

And to think how often in the past few weeks I've seen profoundly immature behavior on the part of adults and called it “acting like a four-year-old.” No way. Those of us whose behavior occasionally veers into the abhorrent, pathetically self-indulgent and ridiculous are nowhere near the exalted category of four-year-olds, if Jax and Reddy are any example.

*Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,  
whose sin is covered.*

*Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,  
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*

With the recent passing of Mary Tyler Moore, I was reminded that when I was a young teenager, she starred in a film called *Ordinary People*. We had a youth director at my home church at that time, Bob Dykstra, who is now the longtime Professor of Pastoral Theology at Princeton Seminary, and when *Ordinary People* came out, it immediately became Bob's favorite movie.

*Ordinary People*, although in some ways a painful movie to watch, was such a breath of fresh air in places like my hometown in central Illinois. Bloomington, Illinois is where the world headquarters of State Farm Insurance is located, so you had this corporate monolith right in the middle of what may have already been the most pragmatic, practical, rational, repressed people in the world. These are my people. We are about as comfortable with showing emotion as we are with chewing on eggshells.

And *Ordinary People* was about people like us, and people all over the Midwest—white, reasonably well off people, anyway—for whom the tragedies and broken relationships that have befallen them finally can no longer be plastered over with small talk and forced smiles and the trappings of financial and social achievement.

It seemed like it was a movie for people who needed to feel human again—or even to be reminded what it is to feel human. And sometimes people will do everything they can to avoid the vulnerability or the responsibility of feeling human.

Shawna Bowman is a PC(USA) pastor in the Presbytery of Chicago. She wrote a piece called Prayer for Ash Wednesday, which says in part:

“Jesus was one of those strange mystics who always seemed to know  
the need of the one standing in front of him  
Lost, found,  
hungry, fed,  
afraid or joyful—  
one look and he just knew, like a soul-reader,  
who you are and what you're lacking, or hoarding, or harboring.

“As we embark on this Lenten journey,” she wrote,  
“let's tell the truth about ourselves:  
Some of us have more than we need.

If we have more than we need  
let us release the extra and the excess back into the world  
trusting our fullness will be enough.

“Some of us are overwhelmed.  
If we’re filled up so full we’re bursting  
let’s stop.  
Stop eating or drinking.  
Stop moving.  
Stop yessing every question and request.  
Just stop. Rest. Pray. Repeat.

“Some of us have nothing left to give and nothing left to give up.  
If we’re empty, then let’s get fed,  
but let’s choose wisely,  
let’s fill ourselves on something that will sustain us.  
Bread sure, but how about deep and abiding love?  
How about a [big-ol’] spoonful of grace?

“Some of us are lost.  
If we’re lost and spiraling or buried under rubble  
then let’s put our arms around one another and lament.  
Lament the lost and the left behind,  
Lament the darkness,  
Lament the dead and dying,  
Lament at the borders and in the borderlands.  
Let’s cry out for help and human connection  
and for the soul-reader to find us, to see us and to feed us too.

“Some of us are found.  
If we are standing on solid ground,  
If we know who and whose we are,  
If we have glimpses of the beauty  
    of the soul-reader’s wild and redeeming grace  
then we also know it’s not our own doing  
    and we didn’t get here on our own.  
We know the road can be hard and long  
and we know we must reach forward and back  
to bring one another along  
To pick one another up

To become soul-readers and rehumanizers ourselves...”<sup>v</sup>

The project of rehumanization could not be more crucial right now.

Jewish synagogues and community centers, including here in Asheville, are being terrorized by bomb threats. Muslims are being targeted. Decades of frustration with political correctness have burst a cork and now racist, xenophobic filth is being presented by some as if it were a legitimate political movement.

We know when things are wrong. Terrorizing people is wrong. Lying is wrong. Taking the Lord’s name in vain is wrong. Despising your kin is wrong. Not knowing that every human being is your kin is wrong. Treating any human being like a disease is wrong.

We know when those things are wrong. We can remember at least that much of our humanity. But still we need to be reminded. But as Paul says in Romans, “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”<sup>vi</sup>

Jesus interrupted the terrorizing of an accused woman; healed and did not shun lepers; fed hungry people; and by his words and his stories and his actions taught forgiveness and inclusion and love, all on his long journey to the cross.

What does it mean to fully embrace our humanity, the fact that we are made in the image of God, the fact that someone died to redeem our lives, the fact that we humans are called to carry our crosses on our own mortal, human journey?

Each Lent, I attend to Frederick Buechner’s observations and reflections for Lent. He writes,

“In many cultures there is an ancient custom of giving a tenth of each year’s income to some holy use. For Christians, to observe the forty days of Lent is to do the same thing with roughly a tenth of each year’s days. After being baptized by John in the river Jordan, Jesus went off alone into the wilderness where he spent forty days asking himself the question what it meant to be Jesus. During Lent, Christians are supposed to ask one way or another what it means to be themselves.

...“When you look at your face in the mirror, what do you see in it that you most like and what do you see in it that you most deplore?”<sup>vii</sup>

“If you had only one last message to leave to the handful of people who are most

important to you, what would it be in twenty-five words or less?

“Of all the things you have done in your life, which is the one you would most like to undo? Which is the one that makes you happiest to remember?”

“Is there any person in the world, or any cause, that, if circumstances called for it, you would be willing to die for?”

“If this were the last day of your life, what would you do with it?”

Buechner wrote, “To hear yourself try to answer questions like these is to begin to hear something not only of who you are but of both what you are becoming and what you are failing to become.”

“While I kept silence,” says Psalm 32,  
“my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.  
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;  
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you,  
and I did not hide my iniquity;  
I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,’  
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.”

The psalms are for people who aren’t on their best behavior anymore,  
who are tired, and beaten down;  
tired of being afraid of things that you should legitimately be afraid of.

The psalms come from a place of deepest need and hope and fear and longing.

They say to God, “I need you to teach me these things again—things I already know, things I often become too politicized or too stubborn or too self-centered to think about on my own.”

Lent is a time when followers of Jesus Christ once again, with intention and purpose and humility, ask him to show them what it means to be human.

I saw a quote the other day where Michael Jordan, the greatest basketball player there ever was, was talking about why he has been so very successful in his field, and he said, “I’ve missed over 9,000 shots in my career. I’ve lost almost 300

games. Twenty-six times I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. That is why I succeed."<sup>viii</sup>

Our friend Slats (a.k.a. Colleen Toole) wrote a deeply moving prayer for Ash Wednesday that ended with these words:

the truth i wear on my forehead today is:  
i live in a body made of ashes.  
it is at once fragile and resilient—  
it is easily torn apart  
but never destroyed.  
it is built from the ruins.  
it carries with it the history of generations,  
and incubates a new creation.  
it is death  
and it is life,  
and it is Yours.

This Lent and always, may we all find what we need  
to follow our savior, our God,  
more faithfully, more truthfully, more fruitfully, more effectively, more lovingly,

and may this season be holy and introspective and abundant  
for people like us who need to remember how it feels to be human again.

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<sup>i</sup> Psalm 8:5.

<sup>ii</sup> Romans 12:3.

<sup>iii</sup> Marianne Williamson, from *A Return To Love: Reflections on the Principles of A Course in Miracles*.

<sup>iv</sup> NBC Nightly News with Lester Holt, Thursday, March 2, 2017.

<sup>v</sup> Shawna Bowman, "Prayer For Ash Wednesday." <https://artforgodsake.com/words/>

<sup>vi</sup> Romans 7:19.

<sup>vii</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 74-75.

<sup>viii</sup> Quoted in Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson, *Nike Culture: The Sign of the Swoosh* (Sage Publications, 1998), 49.