

**Homily**  
**Ash Wednesday**  
**February 14, 2024**  
**6:30pm**

Text: 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Theme: The Shadows Gather

[prayer]

“We beg you...‘Be reconciled to God!’” (2 Cor 5:20b CEB).

These are strong, almost desperate, words from Paul. Which has us wondering: What exactly does it mean to be reconciled to God?

The word ‘reconcile’ means to ‘restore friendly relations’ or to ‘settle a disagreement.’ In accounting terms it means to ‘make one account consistent with another.’

Our friend Cathy Wann reconciles our books here at Community UMC. Once a month she comes into the office and checks our bookkeeper’s work to make sure the ins and outs of our finances align with each other.

Some theologies argue that God is like a cosmic bookkeeper, tallying our sins in one column and His holiness in another. They teach that the deficit between our sins and God’s holiness is so large that it takes the sinless life of Jesus to cover the debt we owe.

That is one way to think of the Atonement. Like every atonement theology, it has its pros and cons. But the reconciliation that Paul describes in 2 Corinthians is not exactly bookkeeping. Nor is it psychological, addressing our spiritual estrangement from God and a relationship that needs mending.

In antiquity ‘reconciliation’ usually referred to the restoration of property to its original purpose. When Paul speaks of reconciliation, he is thinking of God’s property – God’s creation. One of the things we remember on Ash Wednesday is that we are created by God, which means we are part of creation. “The Lord God

formed the human from the topsoil [the dust] of the fertile land and blew life's breath into his nostrils. The human came to life" (Gen 2:7).

Sin disfigures creation, disfigures us. It distorts God's intended purpose for us – to be reflections of His image and conduits of His love and blessing. Lent calls us to attend to the corners of our lives where the shadows gather, where sin has a foothold. Those corners, those bits of our souls, are divine property, parts of God's creation. They belong to God, not the works of sin and darkness. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, Paul sees God's plan for restoring His intended purpose in each of us and all of creation. God's work in us through Jesus Christ reclaims those shadowy corners of our souls and restores our whole lives for God's purposes.

Paul encourages us to live in that restored creation *today*. "If anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!" (2 Cor 5:17). We are called to live in hope and confidence of the new creation that God is working inside us. Like Paul, we will face affliction, hardship, and all manner of suffering in our lives. But it is our hope in the new creation, and nothing else, that dictates how we respond to this suffering: with purity, knowledge, patience, generosity, love, truth, and righteousness (vv. 6-7). If we let these qualities form us and our choices, not just when life is going well, but especially when the shadows of sin and darkness are growing long, then we will have made a witness worthy of Jesus Christ.

On Ash Wednesday we mark ourselves with ash crosses as a sign of penitence. We acknowledge our sin, our brokenness, and the reality of death. But we also proclaim that while we wrestle with the dark things of life, our lives do not belong to the darkness. They belong to God. The ash cross is not a sign of our guilt or shame. The cross on our foreheads is a mark of our belovedness, our belonging in God's beautiful creation. It is also a sign of our healing, a healing that has already begun. Already we are being remade into the new creation that Christ announced with his resurrection. Penitence therefore is not punishment; it is the necessary work of restoring what has been lost so we can be made whole. The cross we wear is a symbol of our ongoing transformation into the image of Jesus.

Amen.