

Ash Wednesday: Pride

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[0 : 00] Welcome to all of you. Welcome to Church of the Advent. Happy Valentine's Day. Glad that we could be here to celebrate Valentine's Day together. It's an interesting, fortuitous, amusing coincidence that these two days would occur on the same day.

It's a wonderful illustration in many ways of the contrast between the culture that we live in and the faith that some of us in this room profess.

Yes. You may not know this about Valentine's Day, but it actually has a sort of assorted history. It's named after St. Valentine, but long before that, even before probably the Roman Empire, it was originally a festival called Lupercalia.

And you may have read about this, but Lupercalia was a little bit different than our modern version of Valentine's Day. And they would say, priests would gather in a cave and they would sacrifice a dog and a goat, or sometimes multiple goats, depending on, I suppose, the year.

And they would then take the bodies of the animals and they would take the flesh off and they would turn the hides into whips. And then they would take all of their clothes off and they would run through the streets whipping the women because they believed it would bless them with greater fertility.

[1 : 18] So this is the origins of Valentine's Day. So the next time you want to complain about the D.C. dating culture, just be thankful that we don't live back then.

So this is the history of Valentine's Day. Since then, it has become this ode to romantic love and desire. And tonight, maybe many of us or some of us are maybe even going to go out after this. It's a night to sort of escape the realities of our life for a night to seek romance and passion and erotic desire. It's a great celebration of those things in our culture.

It feels like you couldn't contrast that more with what we're doing here. We are gathered to talk about death. Now, why would anybody want to do that? It feels like such a joyless thing to focus on mortality and sin.

But in reality, if you begin to push into the heart of what we're here to do this evening, it has a lot more to do with joy and pleasure than we might originally think.

[2 : 26] Because when we talk about sin, and tonight begins a series for those of us who are part of Church of the Advent looking at what are called the seven deadly sins, when we push into the reality of what sin is, what the seven deadly sins are, they are all ways in which amazing, beautiful, glorious gifts that God has given his people have become twisted, disconnected from the giver, distorted, so that instead of giving joy and pleasure, they rob us of those things.

And so the more we understand sin and how to escape the power of sin, the more we are actually delving into the territory of pure joy, the likes of which a holiday like Valentine's Day could never hope to touch.

And so tonight we're going to begin by talking about what most people consider to be, and I think biblically speaking, what is the sin that gave birth to all sin in the world, which is, of course, the sin of pride.

And we have this parable that Jesus told that Zachary just read for us that comes from Luke chapter 18. Most of the time, Jesus' parables are hard to understand.

They're obscure, and you need to pull open a commentary and sometimes see what people think they mean. Well, this parable is actually an exception to that rule. This parable is completely straightforward in its meaning.

[3 : 58] Suspiciously straightforward in its meaning. You read it and you think it can't be this obvious. It's a story of two men who go to the temple to pray, and the Pharisee prays aloud, stands off by himself, and prays aloud so that everybody can hear, God, I thank you that I'm not like other

men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, people who voted for Hillary, people who voted for Trump, whatever.

I thank you that I'm not like those men or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get. And Jesus contrasts that with the tax collector who can't even raise his eyes from the ground and can only beat his breast and cry out, God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

You read this parable and you think, it's so obvious. The meaning, it's right there. Right? What's the answer? What does the parable tell us? Well, it tells us, don't be like that Pharisee and pray in the prideful way that he prayed.

Be like the tax collector. Beat your breast. Cry out to God for mercy. And then we do that and we say, thank God I was smart enough not to be like that Pharisee.

And then we realize all too quickly, a little too late, that the trap has sprung and that Jesus purposefully laid this parable out to be temptingly simple so that it would be like reaching for peanut butter on the trigger of a rat trap and we're caught.

[5 : 45] And we realize that this is the way human beings are wired to think in terms of comparison. Right? Jesus understands something about human nature and something specifically about pride.

That pride, and this is not his language, this is my language, that pride is like a rat. That pride is something that hides in the basement of our hearts and it spreads sin and division and discontentment and evil wherever it goes.

And so pride, Jonathan Edwards said, Jonathan Edwards is the 18th century pastor and theologian who was one of the principal players in the Great Awakening, this huge movement of spiritual revival.

When he wrote about revival and then he wrote about things that inhibited revival, he said the thing that most inhibits revival is pride. Hidden spiritual pride.

Pride that you don't even know is there but it's hiding like rats in the basement of your heart. And like rats, pride is extremely difficult to exterminate.

[6 : 57] You can't just go down into the basement with a broom and sweep it out the door. The problem is, the minute you do that and then you turn your attention elsewhere, it sneaks right back in.

And you know, D.C., if you live in a row house in D.C., they're just rats that just go from one house to another. And it's the same with pride. Pride just gets transferred from one person to another, one situation to another.

It has to be baited. It has to be coaxed out. It has to be killed. This is why Jesus tells this parable.

It's a rat trap for our pride. And so as we think about this and the nature of pride and we wonder how much of this is an issue in my heart, we have to ask the question, how do we see spiritual pride in our own lives?

How do we actually lay eyes on it? In the darkness of the basement. And coming back to Jonathan Edwards, he actually writes this. He says, quote, Since spiritual pride in its own nature is so secret, it cannot be so well discerned by immediate intuition on the thing itself.

So you can't just turn inward and sort of spot your pride and say, oh, there it is. Oh, there's where I'm being prideful. He says, that's fruitless. He says, it is best identified by its fruits and effects.

[8 : 16] In other words, and this is as far as we'll go with this metaphor, pride like rats leaves droppings. As far as I'm going to go. It leaves droppings.

In other words, there are fruits and effects of pride. And when you see those things in your life, those symptoms, if you follow them like a trail, they will lead you to the nest. And so Edwards lists some things.

He says, if these things show up in your life, if you see these things, these are evidence of hidden pride. So the first thing he talks about is criticism. Are you a person who has a critical spirit?

Do you tend to find faults in others and minimize them in yourself? Are you the kind of person that hears a sermon on spiritual pride and thinks, I really know somebody who needs to hear this sermon on spiritual pride?

If you're thinking that way, chances are there is some pridefulness underneath it. He also says that contempt, right, so the devaluing of other people, that that is evidence of spiritual pride.

[9 : 18] He also talks about defensiveness. You know, people who, the moment you're questioned, the moment you are challenged, the moment someone tries to rebuke you, even someone who loves you, your hands come up.

He says that's actually evidence of spiritual pride. He talks about indifference to the needs of others. Do you have a hard time generating compassion and empathy for people in your life, people with real needs?

Do you have a hard time caring? He says that's actually connected to pride. So all of these things that he's listing, he's saying, the real reason that you're critical, the real reason that you're contemptuous, the real reason that you don't care about the needs of the people around you is pride.

And actually what's interesting about these first four is John Gottman, who some of you know from his work on marriage. He's the famous marriage researcher who says that he can predict with over 90% accuracy whether or not a couple is going to be together in five years.

Just by hearing a snippet of their conversation, he can predict whether or not they're going to stay together. And he says one of the main ways he does that is by detecting what he calls the four horsemen of the apocalypse.

[10:29] So when he hears a couple interact, he's looking for four things. And he says, if any of these things show up significantly in their interactions, there's a very good chance the marriage is going to fall apart and the couple's going to end up divorced.

And guess what those four things are? The four horsemen of the apocalypse. Criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and indifference.

It's interesting. He's not quoting Jonathan Edwards. He's found this on his own. So what that shows us is that Gottman has found that the real killer of marriage, in other words, the real killer of intimate relationships, is actually pride underneath criticism and defensiveness and all of these things.

And then he adds a couple of more signs or leavings, if you will, in our lives that evidence pride. Superficiality, you know, people who tend to care more about how they're perceived than the actual state of their heart.

The religious community is full of this, full of people who are experts at visible holiness. The holiness that is observable and measurable, right?

[11:45] He says that conceals pride. Presumption before God. How dare you, God? How dare you not answer the prayer that I prayed in the way that I hoped.

If there is a God and he's loving, surely he would love and accept a person like me. He says that's evidence of pride. And then lastly, attention seeking. Now, I don't think we go out and say, look at me, look at me, look at me.

At least most of us don't. Don't do that. If you do, you shouldn't. But I think that there are other ways that we seek attention. I think that an inability to say no to people, a need to be needed, you know? I think that's a form of attention. He says that's rooted in pride, right? So all of these things are evidences of pride. And so, you know, another way of looking at this is this.

He says, you know, if you want to become less critical, if you want to become more compassionate toward the needs of others, if you want to become more open to critical feedback, these are issues that you are wanting.

[12:45] He says you shouldn't target those things. Target pride. And by targeting pride in your life, you root out all of these other things. You clean out the nest. Fortunately for us, we have Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent.

And if you're new to this observance, if you're new to this season, then it is custom designed to enable us to seed out and to root it out and ultimately to leave it at the foot of the cross.

That's why we're here tonight. tonight is to begin this war on pride in our own hearts. The extermination has begun. And so tonight, in just a little while, Dan and I are going to stand up here and we're going to invite you to come forward and we're going to put ashes on your forehead and we're going to tell you, remember that you have come from dust and that one day you will go back to dust.

From dust you have come and to dust you shall return. That sounds morbid, but think about what we just said. There's no such thing as proud dust.

Right? There's no such thing. There's nothing proud about dust, about mortality. I think perhaps that may be why our culture has such a vigorous focus on youth.

[14:05] We spend billions of dollars to continue looking young. We deny death in every way we possibly can. We do everything we can to extend life because mortality is humiliating.

You know? It's humiliating. So we put ashes on our head to remind ourselves of that. We also fast during Lent because guess what? When you go down into the basement of your heart, that rat of pride is not going to be out in the open.

Pride hides behind our comforts. So when you begin to strip away your comforts, you know, even little things like caffeine or alcohol or any of the things that people give up, you strip away even the smallest things and sometimes, you know, the little things are even more effective because then you go a week or two and you're about ready to crumble and then you realize how utterly dependent we are on all of these stupid little comforts.

And that is severely humbling. It's incredibly humbling. So we fast. To show ourselves that while we love to think of ourselves as autonomous, independent, self-possessed beings, that we are in fact creatures of quasi-addictive habits in all areas of our life.

And then thirdly, Lent is a time to focus on more than ever before. Christians should always do this, but Lent this season that we're entering into is a time to focus on the needs of those around you.

[15 : 33] Isaiah 58 says, the kind of fasting that the Lord desires is to care for the poor, right, to free the oppressed. That's the kind of fasting that glorifies God.

The reason we give these things up is to focus on the needs around us because guess what? That annihilates pride because pride is not so much thinking less of yourself, or I'm sorry, humility is not so much thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less, as has often been said.

And then lastly, and most importantly, Lent is a time to remember why we need Easter and why we need a Savior precisely like Jesus, why He is the only one who can offer hope to people like us.

And there are two things that we see that offer that hope. First, His life and His death. You cannot look at the life of Jesus, compare it to your own, and remain proud.

If you think of yourself as a loving person or a kind person, or if you think that you care about the downtrodden, or that you're doing good in the world, compare yourself to Jesus. And then look at His death on the cross.

[16 : 46] You know, as this parable says, and I think in many ways foretells, you know, the cross humbles the proud. You cannot look at the cross and the innocent suffering and remain proud.

If you really look at it, the cross humbles the proud. And then as we continue in this story and in this journey, we will eventually come to Easter morning.

And on Easter morning, we will celebrate the resurrection. And the resurrection shows the exaltation of the humble. The resurrection shows the great mystery at the heart of our faith, where the path of humility leads, leads, where all of this is meant to take us.

And that is why we end this journey in the celebration of Easter. It shows us that the man who was most humbled, once that had been accomplished, rose from death and was glorified.

And the promise of Easter is that we will one day share in that glory. But the road to life passes through death. And so that's why we're here. We are entering into death that we might one day taste life anew.

[18 : 05] Let's pray. Let's pray.