

ASH WEDNESDAY

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Psalm 51:1-17

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

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February 17, 2010

Masks can be entertaining. There's a wonderful air of mystery around an elegant masked ball or the Carnival in Venice. At Halloween it can be fun to wear a mask and play at being incognito for a while, watching others interact while you yourself are protected from view.

I once took part in an exercise where each of us made plaster masks of our faces, and then we used these masks to reflect on the various roles we play from day to day. We realized that in public we sometimes wear masks of pride, or bravado, or even indifference. In our working life we wear masks of competence and professionalism. Even as parents we wear masks, playing the disciplinarian, negotiator or taskmaster as need arises. Our group was challenged to consider the relationship between our public faces and our essential being, to go deep and reflect on our truest identity as children of God, freed from any need for judgment and loved just for who we are.

Sometimes the masks we wear can be confining, even damaging. Gordon MacDonald reflected that in his family growing up, appearances were everything. His father was a respected public figure and an inspiring speaker, his mother beautiful, vivacious, and musically talented. That's the face the world saw. But Gordon said that at home his parents "often quarreled bitterly and systematically destroyed each other's aspiration to be healthy human beings. They never understood each other or knew how to treat the other with dignity or affection." Many times after an argument when his father had stomped out the door to who-knows-where, Gordon's mother would turn to her son and say, "You must never tell anyone... If people knew about this, it would destroy your father's career."

So Gordon became proficient at wearing a mask. It took the influence of caring mentors at a Christian school, as well as many years in a healthy, loving marriage, to help him realize that "appearance-management" would never make things right with him. Instead of pretending that everything was "just fine," Gordon found real freedom in being able to admit that by nature he was "not fine." None of us are. He found great relief and hope in acknowledging that he could only be made right through the infinite goodness of God. ("The Secret-Driven Life", Gordon MacDonald, www.ChristianityToday.com 2009)

Ash Wednesday is a day for laying aside our masks. It's a time to admit before God that everything is not "just fine" with us. Today we put an end to pretending, and

we experience genuine relief and freedom as we receive the grace of God's deep and forgiving love.

Today we reflect thoughtfully upon our lives. This means first being honest with ourselves about who we are, not who we wish we were. It means being honest about our sin. Not wallowing in guilt, but coming to terms with the basic brokenness of our lives. Feeling the pain we have caused for others, as well as the pain of our broken relationship with God. We acknowledge that in turning away from God, as we do time and again, we have turned away from the very source of our life. We have substituted our will for God's will. We have chosen earthly treasures over heavenly ones.

Opening our hearts in repentance is not just a matter of listing our failings. It is admitting that we cannot make it without our Creator. On our own we are only "ashes to ashes, dust to dust." We call upon God to give us back our lives, to restore us, and to forgive us.

It's a terribly risky thing to do – to set those masks aside and let down our carefully-crafted defenses. We could not do it unless we knew that God was trustworthy, and that the pathway had been made safe for us.

In Christ, the way has been made safe. A path has been opened by God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Today, through Christ, we stand in the presence of our Living God whose wisdom is beyond any human wisdom, and whose insight pierces through appearances to see all things and all people as they really are. And more than this, who looks at us in love, and with compassion that reconciles us to God and to each other.

Today we set the masks aside. We ask for insight to see ourselves more clearly, as we are, in our failings and frailty. And also to see more clearly the gifts God has given, which can be put to use for God's good and compassionate purpose. We ask our Creator's forgiveness and the opportunity to begin again, in Christ's mercy, so that Christ's mercy may show itself through us. Amen.