

Ash Wednesday (2Mar22)
Matthew 6; Psalm 51; Isaiah 58

Coming from what we heard of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, the season of Lent has spiritual practices, traditionally known as disciplines. That they require discipline or that we are disciplined by them is an instructive term for the effort. The disciplines are almsgiving, prayer, and fasting—or charitable acts, devotion, and sacrifice or giving something up. For now, I'll encourage you to be disciples by attending to the practice, to be disciplined.

Another common aspect of this season is penance or repentance.

Three things about that: First is that the original Greek word literally meant transforming your mind or perspective

So, two, this isn't just feeling dour or ashamed about your sinfulness, how rotten you are.

With those two, third, we can consider Lent a time of spring cleaning, long its historical character. I know I always feel good when things are cleaner, like a bathroom the other evening that I'd neglected for too long. It's also evident there's no reason to clean what you thought was already clean, so it's also about needing to notice what's dirty.

The season of Lent may be noticing what's been neglected and dirty, what's messed up, honest soul searching, and then discovering ourselves met by God's work of cleaning, of forgiveness and restoration, of baptismal washing, and finding our outlook renewed, our minds transformed, and to feel good!

In that way, let's focus on how Jesus commended for us a way of praying. It's so common it has become standard for most every worship service, and we maybe hardly heard it or noticed tonight (though fresh translations can make it stand out more). The model prayer Jesus offers begins, "Our Father..."

We stop right at the first word, noting the "Our" because it certainly could've had no possessive pronoun; after all, it's a little shocking to lay special claim to God.

It also could've been "my Father." Jesus just told us not to publicize our prayers, but to go into your room and shut the door. Presumably, if you're alone in your room, there aren't others there. This isn't a group effort! Yet even if you're praying as an individual, Jesus still gave you communal words to remember others besides yourself, to know you are with or praying on behalf of others. Jim Wallis, the founder of Sojourners, has described this by saying that your faith is deeply personal but is not private.

More, a recent essay in the *Christian Century* was entitled "Whose Father in Heaven?" and says: "In the history of the prayer's interpretation, 'our' has sometimes been understood expansively: the crowd, all people, all of creation. It has also been understood narrowly: the children of Abraham, the Jewish people, anyone who has accepted that Jesus is the Christ, the disciples."* I suppose tonight, we might just think of it as the people joining in this particular worship service, in the room and online.

The essay suggests, though, that "the prayer is teaching us how to pray for our enemies," whom Jesus also just instructed us to love and the persecutors to pray for, as children of our Father in heaven (Matt.6:44-45). The essay goes on to draw out the implications of the oppressed in Jesus' time or us now seeing antagonists as part of our family: When we pray for God's will to be done, it's a prayer that abusers would not be hurting us, because God's will must be to fix this. But as the prayer goes on, it also sees those who have stolen our daily bread as within God's care, and—even though we might prefer to pray for them to "rot in hell for what they have done"—the prayer instead offers the peacemaking forgiveness we had been denied.

* <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/whose-father-heaven>

It is coincidental that Ash Wednesday is marked simultaneously with all our conversations filled with concerns for Ukraine, for the people fleeing their homes, suffering under aggression from Russia and Vladimir Putin. I've seen many say we should pray for the people of Ukraine; I've seen little that suggests prayers for Putin.

While fully encouraging support for endangered lives, still with great humility, I ask: what if Jesus wants us to put ourselves in the middle, to see it as one big unhappy family, as we pray "Our Father," with prayers be for the guilty as well as the innocent, for the perpetrator besides the victim? Prayers not so quick to judge who are the bad guys and claim the side of righteousness but to see the mess, the messy middle, that we need God's spring cleaning?

Another coincidence of Ash Wednesday was when we gathered four years ago, it was with news of a shooting at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, where 14 young people and three staff members had been killed with a semi-automatic rifle. We prayed much for the students, for the friends and family and community. How much did we pray gun manufacturers? Or for the killer Nikolas Cruz? How do we see him as a child of "our Father in heaven?" How do we pray now, as he still awaits sentencing and perhaps will be given capital punishment, further expanding the death toll among God's children?

What might these prayers do for us? If we notice we are bound up in a world of hurt, of war and violence? What does this prayer mean with bomb threats even this week in Madison schools? What if instead of first condemning we pray for the other political party, or amid a family feud, or our other personal instances? How might God's spring cleaning—the healing of forgiveness and reconciliation and fresh starts—renew and transform our minds, even just by praying the words "Our Father in heaven?"

Maybe we'll find our way into the prophet Isaiah's beautiful blueprint in these words: "If you

remove from among you the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in."

We've seen that Ukraine could well use restored streets. Probably Russia, too. And our own neighborhoods, and maybe even our arteries: Create in me a clean heart, O God, our Father.