

Welcome to worship this evening.

Every coach knows the star athlete can be a star nuisance in the players' rooms. Conductors know the virtuoso musician can be a virtuoso distraction to the orchestra. Sometimes you add to a team or an organization by subtracting a problem.

Following Jesus is an intentional journey in grace and a deliberate way of living that daily strips away the obstacles & obstructions in our lives & increases in us the likeness of Jesus.

You've heard me quote Dietrich Bonhoeffer before: "The cross is laid on every Christian...When Christ calls someone, he bids them come and die."

CS Lewis: "The Church exists for nothing else but to draw people into Christ, to make them little Christs."

John the Baptist said it 1st & best: "*He must increase but I must decrease.*" He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less.

Over these weeks of Lent, we'll be asking God to do just that...less of us...more of Jesus. We'll be asking the Father to make good on Paul's assurance: "*I have been crucified with Christ & I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.*" Galatians 2:20 – in that promise we find our hope.

Please stand

In the name of the Father, & of the Son, & of the Holy Spirit – Amen

We sing – Lord of All Hopefulness

To the service order...

Ash Wednesday – '21 B – ADDITION BY SUBTRACTION: LESS ME – MORE JESUS

Probably the greatest frustration I ever experienced as a follower of Jesus was when I first began to take my faith seriously. I was part of a university ministry & felt very strongly God's claim on me as his own...and his call to more of his life being made real in mine. And I just couldn't do it. It wasn't for lack of trying or lack of help. I was surrounded by people who encouraged me & supported me & validated that sense that we were individually & collectively on the path of Christlikeness.

We prayed. We read the Bible. We worshipped. I went to 2 different churches on Sunday morning. Dwight Edwards (Grace Bible Church) led a Bible study for students that ran for just over an hour & Terry Teikle (Aldersgate Methodist) led a rockin' worship experience that never ran under hour & a half...We were always late for lunch at the cafeteria 'cos he just could preach. I was also part of a Sunday night student ministry where John Clifford & the Young Life folks in a quieter calmer way cared for our souls deeply/intensely...modelled day-by-day faithfulness. No frills. No fancy. Just Jesus.

But it felt to me like I was on a treadmill running for my life & losing ground. 2 steps forward & 3 in reverse. I never felt like I made much progress...Growth was what happened to others...not me. It didn't feel like anything was different. Sin...which I was sure had been defeated in Christ was still my daily fight. The old me was still there...the me that I was sure God wanted gone was still causing trouble. The gap $\frac{b}{t}$ where I was sure God was leading me & where I was seemed insurmountable & I felt like I was standing in quicksand.

But John Clifford...the bigger than Ben Hur amazing gentle giant listened one afternoon when I went to spend time with him...and he stopped me about 5 minutes into my tale of spiritual woe...It was pretty simple...he told me that moral perfection was not an option...it's beyond our reach in this life, but what I should live toward was moral purpose...live on purpose...live like you mean it.

Years later when I read that Martin Luther had told Phillip Melanchthon to "Sin boldly but more boldly still claim the grace of Christ," I heard John's voice again encouraging me to live with moral purpose...to use each day to reaffirm the Scripture we read tonight & John had offered as an anchor: *God made Christ, who never sinned, to be sin for us, so we could be made right with God through Christ.*

Jesus became that which turned God's stomach so I could be adopted as a son. Jesus became that which separated me from the Father, so I could be welcomed home. And he did that for you...all of us...whoever draws breath on this earth.

God is just & holy & justice holiness righteousness means sin/self-rule has consequences=>death. The demands of God are certain, but they are the demands of the God who created & cares passionately/intimately about you/me. God's justice provides Jesus Christ. God's holiness & righteousness provides the sacrifice for us.

Lent isn't about punishing ourselves for being human/sinful...denying something we'll just have again in a few weeks' time. It's not about that unreachable standard of moral perfection. It's about living with moral purpose...living like we mean it when we ask God for new hearts...clean hearts...Lent is about peeling away layers of evasion self-delusion & false promises – all the excuses we make which keep us from the truth of God's word. Lent is about looking at our lives in as bright a light as possible, the light of Christ. In that light, Lent begins with each of us admitting to ourselves, to each other & to Jesus that we are broken & no amount of pretending will make those broken places whole. We acknowledge our desperate need of God to heal us, to make us whole, & create in us clean, new & honest hearts that live for Jesus alone. We admit our common human destiny, "dust to dust." Nothing we were & to nothing we are going.

But in our dustiness, Jesus meets us. In our brokenness, Jesus comes to us. In our desperation, Jesus takes hold of us so that our dead end destination is transformed into a living hope-filled future in his presence. In our death Jesus gives us his life. In his dying & rising we are reborn as children of God. We live forever marked by the sign of this cross so that those around us see the power of God at work in us – healing – restoring – bringing us to the abundant eternal fullness only Jesus can create.

In this cross...there is less of me...dying by degrees each day and more of Jesus growing through his Spirit given to me without limit.

God makes good on the assurance:

God made Christ, who never sinned, to be sin for us, so we could be made right with God through Christ.
and on this one

"I have been crucified with Christ & I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."
Galatians 2:20 – in those promises we find our hope.

Amen