

Epworth Chapel on the Green
March 1, 2017
Ash Wednesday
The Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17
Psalm 103:8-13
2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10
Matthew 6:1-21

Growing up as a kid in Nebraska, my grandmother Snavelly had an annual ritual that she passed on to my mother, and so it was also an annual experience for our family. Perhaps you experienced this annual rite as well.

I'm referring to the annual rite of "spring cleaning." Everything in our house, it seemed, had to be washed and cleaned. All trash and any stuff you weren't using had to be thrown out or given away. All things that remained had to be put "in order" in their proper place.

I remember that I never looked forward to this annual rite. But once it was finished, I remember how good it felt to be in our house, and I especially remember how good it felt to be in my room at that point. My room became a neat place to inhabit once again, a place worth inhabiting.

Here we are tonight, at the beginning of Lent. It is probably no coincidence that the term "Lent" comes from the Old English word *lengten*, which means "spring." It calls to mind the lengthening of the days as spring arrives. From the earliest days of the Church, Lent has been a time for Christians to get their spiritual lives "in order," a time to prepare for the death and resurrection of Christ.

To enjoy a spiritual life that is “in order” sounds wonderful, doesn’t it? It sounds wonderful because we go through much of the year with the painful awareness of how much our lives are *disordered*.

We don’t have the intimacy with God we desire, which affects our intimacy with others. Week in and week out, we are troubled by our sin, by things in our personalities that we would like to change but seem powerless to do so. We lack the will, the time, the energy, to change.

So when someone asks how we are doing, we say, “fine.” We *are* fine, if by “fine” you mean frenzied, insecure, troubled, and conflicted.

Why do we so easily find ourselves in this spiritual condition? One possible answer (which is hard for us to hear) might be: *in our affluent culture, we allow our appetites to control us rather than controlling our appetites.*

St. Augustine said it this way:

We ask of God but cannot receive because our hands are already full. We say, ‘God, fill us up,’ but we are already stuffed. We say, ‘Lord, comfort me,’ but we are already comfortable. What then do we really expect God to do for us?

The writers of Scripture knew how easy it can become to allow our appetites to control us instead of us controlling our appetites. The result of this: lives that are *disordered*. The writers of our texts tonight each have an antidote to this condition, and each provides it in his own way.

For Matthew, one could move toward restoring order to the spiritual life by speaking with God, by giving to others, and by abstaining from food. Prayer, almsgiving, and fasting. There are countless variations on this theme, but at its heart it is good advice.

For the apostle Paul, the route to restoring order in our spiritual lives involves not receiving God's grace in vain. The reason Christ became like us, Paul tells the Corinthians, is so that we might become like Christ. The grace God gives us is not given to us merely for information, but for our *transformation*. For Paul, this means, in part, learning to value others in the Body of Christ, living selflessly and sacrificially so that we don't do anything to cause our brothers and sisters to stumble.

For Joel, the route to restoring spiritual order involves gathering publicly for worship, and allowing certain outward actions to help shape inward experience. As we gather tonight in this service, we will kneel in prayer, we will confess, we will have ashes smeared on our foreheads, and we will celebrate the Eucharist. These actions have no magical or inherent power in themselves, but when an outward action is directed toward a proper end, it can have a powerful role in shaping inner experience.

When Joel says, "rend your hearts, not your garments," that's what he is talking about. The spiritual life, including our Lenten observance, is not about

spiritual *scorekeeping*. It is about spiritual *housecleaning*, about restoring spiritual order to our lives. We should never take up any practice or deny ourselves the same simply for the sake of “doing something.” But if we take up a practice or deny ourselves something for the sake of drawing closer to Jesus, and when we do it under the direction of the Holy Spirit, God fills our lives with a grace that truly can bring order out of the chaos.

As we embark upon our Lenten journey tonight, I encourage you (especially if your spiritual house is not as “ordered” as you would like), to return to our texts for this evening and ponder what they have to offer us. As you do, you’ll find yourself drawing ever closer to Jesus. Of course, that will mean traveling with him to Jerusalem and a Cross. But take heart and be of good cheer: the way of the Cross leads home!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.