Text: 2 Corinthians 5:16-6:10

 **The Bethel Pulpit**

 **Pastor Roger Black**

 March 6, 2019 – Ash Wednesday On the web at [www.bethel-madison.org](http://www.bethel-madison.org/)
 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

Theme: “Reconciled and Reconciling”

 [“Now is the Time!”]

2 Corinthians 6:2b “See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!”

“Now is the time.” When we hear these or similar words, we usually take them to mean not to miss a passing opportunity. You have been waiting to pledge on public radio or television when you hear “that for the next hour your pledge will be matched.” They say, ““Act now and you will receive a free tote bag.” “Now is the time!” There is a sense of urgency, and you call in. You want the benefit that comes from acting quickly. You have no time to waste. So, you better act right now!

Today is Ash Wednesday! It is a day to examine our life and our relationship to God. It is a day to come before God and admit that we stand in need of help and forgiveness in order to be set right with God. Many faiths have such a time. Jewish persons of faith have Yom Kippur and Muslims have a whole month called Ramadan. It seems to be a widespread feeling that left to ourselves we are at odds with God, and we need to repent in a special way. For Christians who live by the grace of God, “Now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation.” Now is the time! It is a time to realize that we, who were separated from God, have been set right with God.

St. Paul has that same kind of urgency when he sums up how we confess our sins and receive God’s forgiveness. Since we have been set right with God through Jesus Christ, we ought to claim that benefit right now! We should make it part of our lives right now. Receiving God’s forgiveness is [to quote Stephen Covey] both urgent and important. For if we live our lives, believing that we are still “at odds with God,” God’s grace really does us no good. We have been made God’s friends, but we still act as if we are God’s enemies. When we do not make the grace and forgiveness of God part of our life now, we may very well die without really experiencing the transformation that comes from being forgiven. We will not become a “new creation.”

Today is a day to examine our life and our relationship to God. But it is also a time to realize that we, who were sinful and separated from God, have been set right with God. Once God’s enemies, we are now God’s friends. Further, as Paul writes, because we have been set right with God, we are to make friends with others. We are to do it right now.

 We must begin by admitting that

I. SIN IS A PART OF OUR LIVES

In our heart of hearts, we know there is something within us that does not square with being a good human being. We need forgiveness. Our desire to be reconciled is universal.

A good example of feeling the need for reconciliation is that of the late, great author Ernest Hemingway. In his short story “The Capital of the World he tells the story of a Spanish father and his teenage son who are estranged from one another. The son’s name is Paco, which is a very common name in Spain, much like John or James. Paco did something very wrong toward his father. In his shame, he runs away from home. Paco’s father searches all over Spain for him, but still cannot find him. In desperation the father makes one last attempt to find his son. He takes out an ad in the Madrid newspaper. The ad reads: “Paco, meet me at the Hotel Montana at noon on Tuesday. All is forgiven. Papa.” Paco’s father prays that the boy will see the ad. Them maybe, just maybe, he will come to the Hotel Montana. At noon on Tuesday the father arrives at the hotel. As he does, he cannot believe his eyes. An entire squadron of police officers have been called out in an attempt to keep order with the loud crowd of young boys. There are over eight hundred youth named Paco who have come to meet his respective father and to find forgiveness in front of the Hotel Montana. Paco’s father is relieved when he finds his own son among them. Although he cannot do anything for the other 799 boys seeking reconciliation, he is able to forgive and to be reconciled with his own dear Paco.

St. Paul writes of this universal need for forgiveness in Romans 3: “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” In The Message Eugene Peterson paraphrases in this way: “there is no difference at all: everyone has sinned and is far away from God’s saving presence. But by the free gift of God’s grace all are put right with him through Christ Jesus, who sets them free. God offered him, so that by his blood he should become the means by which people’s sins are forgiven through their faith in him.” We should be careful today not to move to quickly to the antidote or cure for sin. We need to experience what it means to be snakebit—hopeless left to ourselves, dying in our sin, before we receive the new life in Christ. This will lead to our being transformed from the terribly sick person who is weak and helpless one day to the recovered one who after receiving the powerful medicine of forgiveness is give a new start.

We human beings truly feel a deep need for forgiveness. On Ash Wednesday we can truly say, “now is the time to confess our sins, and to receive forgiveness.” When we do, even though sin remains a part of our lives,

II. WE ARE RECONCILED WITH GOD

I love the Good News Version (Today’s English Version) of the Bible that translates the words of our text: “Anyone who is joined to Christ is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come. All this is done by God, who through Christ changed us from enemies into his friends and gave us the task of making others his friends also. Our message is that God was making all human beings his friends through Christ. We plead on Christ's behalf: let God change you from enemies into his friends!”

“Making friends out of enemies.” What better way is there to understand being reconciled to God! Paul speaks of this in Romans 5 when he writes: “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.  God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.”

When we begin to understand God’s love for us as being unmerited and undeserved, we begin to understand God’s grace and forgiveness. It leads us to stand in awe before the Cross of Christ. It may even lead us to experience God’s grace as if we are receiving or hearing it for the first time.

One of my favorite stories of people understanding God’s love and forgiveness as unmerited and undeserved is that of the Mennonites of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. On October 2, 2006 Charles Roberts IV walked into a one-room Amish schoolhouse on a clear, unseasonably warm Monday morning. This 32-year old husband and father of three ordered the boys and adults to leave, tied up ten little girls between the ages of six and thirteen, and then proceeded to shoot them, killing five and injuring the others, before killing himself. Afterwards, reporters from throughout the world invaded Lancaster County, PA to cover the story. It was then that an unexpected story developed. In the midst of their grief over this shocking loss, the Amish community did not cast blame, they didn’t point fingers, they didn’t hold a press conference with attorneys at their sides. Instead, they reached out with grace and compassion towards the killer’s family. The afternoon of the shooting an Amish grandfather of one of the girls who was killed expressed forgiveness toward the killer. That same day Amish neighbors visited the Roberts family to comfort them in their sorrow and pain. Later that week the Roberts family was invited to the funeral of one of the Amish girls who had been killed. And Amish mourners outnumbered the non-Amish at Charles Roberts’ funeral. It is ironic that the killer was tormented for nine years by the premature death of his young daughter. He never forgave God for her death. Yet after he shot ten innocent Amish school girls, the Amish almost immediately forgave him and showed compassion to his family. This is a powerful story of people who got the real message of how when you are forgiven, you need to be forgiving. All was done in the spirit of knowing that they were once God’s enemies but were made God’s friends. Now they wanted to pass on the forgiving love they had received to others.

 We are reconciled (made friends from enemies) with God through the Cross of Jesus Christ. Now…

I. WE ARE TO BE RECONCILERS WITH OTHERS IN THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH

We are involved in the task of making others friends of Christ. This work of making friends of enemies is at the heart of the Christian faith. We certainly hear it in the Sermon on the Mount from which our gospel for tonight comes. Right before these words, in chapter 5, Jesus proclaims that we ought to love our enemies: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.”

In my ministry I have often been surprised at who are best at being reconcilers. More often than not it is not the apparent brightest and best, who have always walked the straight line in life, never strayed from the path. The ones who have been best at reconciling are those who have known what it is like to have strayed from the fold, perhaps more than once. They are those who know what it means to hear the words “come home, come home,” who, like the prodigal son in Jesus’ great parable, hear the words of the one who seeks us out, Jesus, and know in their own bones what it means to graciously be welcomed in.

Forgiveness has great power. A few years ago a nationwide poll asked, “What word or phrase would you most like to hear uttered to you, sincerely?” Can you guess the first thing people wanted to hear? The first was, “I love you.” The second was, “You are forgiven.” In the Bible we see these words clearly coming from God to us. God speaks His unconditional love for us: “I love you. You are forgiven.”

One man made the most of confession and forgiveness near the close of his life. A little more than 25 years ago, a youth walking by the old log Muskego Chapel on the Luther Seminary campus in St. Paul, Minnesota, peeped in its window and noticed a beautiful chalice sitting on the altar. He broke into the chapel and stole it. Naturally, the young boy didn’t know that this chalice had been a gift to Luther Seminary in 1936 from Norway’s King Olaf. In October 2006, Pastor Glenn Berg-Moberg from St. Anthony Park Lutheran Church, a neighbor of the seminary, called Luther President Rick Bliese, asking for a meeting to discuss “an interesting matter.” The boy who had stolen the chalice, now a grown man, had visited his congregation. He was dying of cancer and had one request: He wanted to return the stolen chalice to the seminary. He had kept the pewter chalice in perfect condition. It had sat on his mantle for 25 years. Finally, its presence had become a source of discomfort to him. Before the man died, he wanted it returned to its rightful owner and place, Luther Seminary and Old Muskego Chapel. President Bliese received the gift of “the prodigal chalice” with surprise and delight. Letters were written to this dying man expressing appreciation, as well as forgiveness for his deed. The lost had been found; now the blind were gaining their sight. The man received the letters with gratitude and died soon afterward. Now this chalice has become doubly special because it was returned after serving the purpose for which it was really intended: calling sinners to repentance and forgiveness.

“Come home, come home.” That is really what Ash Wednesday is all about. Just like the father of the prodigal son, we hear Jesus calling for us.

In closing, let me share with you one of the most compelling reasons to come home. It is to make the most of our lives as followers of Christ. In the movie Dead Poets Society English teacher John Keating is addressing his class of high school boys in the all-male academy. He wants to impress upon them the significance of not putting off to tomorrow what they can do today. First, he takes them out into the hallway and shows them the pictures of those students who went before them. He says, “they made something of their lives, but they are now all food for the worms. You still have a chance to make something of your life.” Then he addresses them in the classroom about the need to do what writer John David Thoreau calls “Carpe Diem,” Latin for “seize the day.” Keating dramatically gets up on a table in the middle of his presentation in class and declares: “"Carpe, carpe. Carpe diem. Seize the day, boys. Make your lives extraordinary."

On this Ash Wednesday, we can well learn the same two lessons Keating taught: “Make something of your life; seize the day.” Let’s begin right now in getting right with God so that we can make something of our lives: glorifying God and serving and loving our neighbor. Amen.