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Peoples Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
Isaiah 58:1-12
Ash Wednesday

ISAIAH 58:1-12

¹Shout out, do not hold back!
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.
²Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments,
they delight to draw near to God.
³"Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.
⁴Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.
⁵Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?

⁶Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
⁷Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
⁸Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.
⁹Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
¹⁰if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.
¹¹The LORD will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.
¹²Your 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.

MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-21

¹"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

²"So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

¹⁶"And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

¹⁹"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

SERMON

This week has been one of those weeks for me. You know the ones I'm talking about. My to do list is a mile long, my Session report was in two days late, I forgot to invite a colleague into a meeting she should have been a part of. Dad called to tell me that I'd blown through our family data plan limit on my phone, I have emails sitting in my inbox from last week that I haven't even read yet, let alone responded to. It's just been one of those weeks where there's too much to do, I'm late for everything, all the plates are spinning in the air, and it's like I'm watching them fall to the ground one by one, smashing right in front of me.

Now, I'm sharing this with you all not so that you'll feel bad for me being overwhelmed, and I'm not sharing this so you can be righteously indignant about your pastor not being on the ball this week. I'm sharing this with you because I hope it's relatable. Again and again this week, I feel like I'm bumping up against my own limitations every time I turn around. And feeling the weight and constraint of my own limitations, it's not a feeling I like very much. In fact, it's ranks among my least favorite experiences in the world. I prefer to feel competent, organized, in control at all times...not snowed and swamped and disappointing. It just feels yucky to be confronted with our limitations, right?

And as much as we might like to pretend otherwise, we are limited people. There are only 24 hours in a day, and some of that time must be given over to eating, sleeping, and using the restroom, we can't work all the time. Our bodies, as wonderfully and thoughtfully made as they might be, they let us down all the time, we're limited

by our own health, our age, our height, our strength, our endurance. Our minds can only juggle so many details before something will be forgotten. Our ability to extend kindness and compassion to others can stretch, but at some point, without finding some way to replenish it, you're going to run dry and snap. It's tempting for us to go around pretending like we can do everything, like we have it all put together and under control, but the reality is that sometimes we'll run up against our own limits, and there's nothing you can do about that. No motivational pep talk is powerful enough to push you beyond the hours you have in a day or the limits of your own body.

And then, in the midst of feeling so angry and frustrated and overwhelmed by my own incompetence and limitations, I was struck by Ash Wednesday. Not the details of it...not the worship planning and sermon writing and ash preparation and all that. No, I was struck by the actual Holy Day itself. Ash Wednesday, and what it means as a part of our Christian faith and tradition. It's the day we mark our entry into a season of fasting, when we turn our eyes and feet toward the wilderness and walk with Jesus into the desert.

Ash Wednesday goes back at least a thousand years, but the idea of entering into a season of fasting goes back all the way to Jesus, and in fact stretches thousands of years prior into early Jewish history, as well. On Ash Wednesday we're invited into a time of intentionally facing our own limitations. It's a day specifically intended to reflect and reveal the frailty of our minds, our intentions, our compassion and love, and especially our physical bodies. When we are marked with the sign of ashes, we hear the words "Remember that you are dust, and to the dust you shall return." There's something beautiful about remembering that we come from the earth, but baked into

that sentiment is the stark reminder that we are limited creatures. Our bodies age and break down, our bodies will fail us, and ultimately each one of us will die. Our bodies go back to the earth. Ash Wednesday is when we state publicly and wear an outward sign on our heads of our limited and frail nature. We are merely human, from the dust we come, to the dust we shall return.

But the beauty of Ash Wednesday is that in being invited to claim our limitations, we're also invited on a journey with Christ. He calls us to turn toward the desert, to enter into 40 days of fasting, of feeling the hot sand burning our feet. This season isn't about seeing our own frail nature for the sake of itself or feeling depressed or whatever, this is a season about seeing our own limits and then seeing even more so how God works with and beyond each one of us to do great things in this world. We need to experience the hot, dry, desiccating desert, the reality of our physical selves, in order that the river of God's grace that flows to us in this Holy time will be all the more compelling and refreshing. It will be all the more welcome when we know how limited, mortal, and human we really are.

We are human, and yet God chooses us anyway.

We are flawed and sinful, and yet Jesus loves us anyway.

Our feet burn in the hot sand, our stomachs growl for the fast of these forty days, and then, right there to our side, is Jesus. His feet are hot and he's hungry, also. And after the forty days of fasting, God sends angels to tend to him, feeding him fresh bread and caring for his needs. Won't God do the same for each one of us?

It may not sound like a word of cheer, but for me it's profoundly hopeful to know that on this holy day, on Ash Wednesday, I am invited to fully confess my own limitations, my own mistakes and sinfulness, my own frailty, to be marked in a way which publicly shows those things I like least about myself. But it's hopeful for me that when I profess this great loss, I'm not going to be left there. Jesus walks with us in this season, Jesus knows and experienced those same human limitations in his own body, Jesus calls us into the fast, and points us toward the cross, and then pushes us even further toward the empty tomb and the folded linens. We are not alone in our darkest, hardest moments, and we will certainly not be left there to dwell. Let us give thanks for the compassion and hopefulness of admitting our own limitations, and being loved all the same by the very creator of the universe.