

Ash Wednesday Service

[2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10](#)

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In 1938, leaders from the United Kingdom, France and Italy travelled to Munich, Germany to meet with Adolf Hitler, and there gave him permission to annex part of the neighbouring nation of Czechoslovakia in exchange for promises of peace. When the British Prime Minister returned home to London, he declared that this agreement represented “Peace for our time.” Of course, he was wrong. Less than a year later, and Hitler annexed the rest of Czechoslovakia, and then invaded Poland. And even if Hitler had kept his word, it still wouldn’t really have meant Peace for our time – while that agreement was being negotiated, Japanese armies were already occupying Korea and China, Italy had invaded Ethiopia, and fascists and communists were fighting a civil war in Spain. One temporary agreement with one dictator didn’t really mean the world was truly at peace. You’ll never get peace by just giving in to the demands of a tyrant. If you want true peace, you need reconciliation.

Because reconciliation is more than just putting aside our differences and agreeing to get along. Reconciliation is more than just a temporary ceasefire, a pause in the conflict. Reconciliation doesn’t mean we keep secretly hating each other while pretending we’re best friends. Reconciliation requires change – it requires transformation.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he tells the church that we are called to a ministry of reconciliation, and he uses the Greek word *Katallasso*, which literally means to change, to alter something or someone so that they better align with another. And when Paul urges the church to be reconciled to God, it's pretty clear who needs to change in this relationship, who needs to be reconciled, transformed. Paul is calling the church to be transformed so that they align with who God is, align with God's nature and righteousness. In the same way that an accountant might reconcile their ledgers to make sure all the balances add up, when we are reconciled with God, we are making sure we match and align and balance with the truth of who God is.

And when we seek that kind of reconciliation, when we accept that we need to be transformed so that we align with God's nature and righteousness, that is necessarily going to cost us something. Reconciliation requires that we leave something behind – that kind of change, that kind of transformation, means that we need to let go of the things that are keeping us from living in alignment with God. Our own sense of power and control – the idea that we know best for ourselves, that we are in charge of our lives – we need to let that go. Our obsession with security at all costs – insuring and insulating ourselves against any possible danger, any possible risk – we need to let that go. To be reconciled with God means we will be different from who we were when we were still in rebellion against God – the tools of war, our pride and hubris, all of that must be laid down and abandoned before we can be reconciled with God. And when we are reconciled with

God, we will inevitably find that this puts us at odds with the world we used to know, the world we used to inhabit. When you re-align yourself with one standard, you will find yourself in conflict with another. Paul warns the church that they will face trouble from the world around them – afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger – but that they will also discover that a reconciled life is a blessed life, a life filled with purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God. Making God's love our standard will cause us physical pain and trouble – we will sacrifice our earthly comfort and security and status – but Paul promises the church that it will be worth it. True reconciliation leads to true peace.

The season of Lent is meant to be a season of reconciliation – a moment in our lives when we look at who we are, and look at who God is, and ask how we can be reconciled to God – how we can align our lives closer and closer to who God is, to make God's love and righteousness the standard that we measure our lives against. During Lent, we let go of something in our lives to make more room for transformation – even a small disruption in our routine can give us an opportunity to see ourselves in a new light, to see who we are meant to be and how we might be different from who we are right now. Lent is a season of putting ourselves a little out of step with our old lives so that we can fall into a new rhythm, God's rhythm. And none of this is easy. It is always tempting to just stick with what we know – to think we can get peace by appeasing our old desires, that there is a shortcut to

reconciliation that doesn't require sacrifice. But the good news is that the kind of reconciliation we are called to take on is the same kind of reconciliation that Jesus made possible when he became one of us, when he entered into creation and made himself sin for our sake. Jesus became a creature of ashes and dust like you and me so that we could be reconciled to God. Jesus lowered himself to the very bottom so that we could be lifted up. And when we are reconciled to God through the grace of Jesus Christ, we will find ourselves reconciled to the people around us in a new way. Christ's ministry of reconciliation makes it possible for us to join in that work, transforming the world around us through the power of his spirit, bringing peace and joy and life wherever we go. In this season of Lent, God calls us to remember who we are – creatures made of ashes and dust, humble, frail and vanishingly finite – and to discover who we are meant to be, through the transforming reconciling love of Jesus Christ: children of our creator, ambassadors for his grace, empowered by his grace to transform the world around us in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.