

The Rev. Josh Stephens  
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Ash Wednesday:  
Learning to Solve the Right Problem

It is good to gather with you for our Ash Wednesday services today. You know right away when you enter that this is no ordinary affair. It's not Sunday morning. It's more solemn and penitential, straight to the point, down to brass tacks. Some of you will feel a bit uncomfortable with the quietness and other rhythms of this day. Others wait all year long for a few moments like this one. Ash Wednesday, along with Good Friday, are the only two specially designated fast days in the Book of Common Prayer, so if you haven't already, you might consider making the rest of the day a bit simpler than usual by skipping out on some technology or social media use or by eating vegetarian or some way of letting go of a bit of luxury today. Regardless, I'm so grateful for your presence here as we begin Lent together.

A few years ago I went to a local gym to get a workout in. I was there to get stronger. Being physically, spiritually, and emotionally fit – being strong – is important to me and I think it's important to just about all of us. In having young children at this time, my mornings and evenings are usually spent with them, so if I am to get the rare workout in then it usually needs to happen at lunchtime.

(Now I don't know if you have ever seen me outside of worship before, but chances are that if you have seen me at any time ever then I am wearing clericals which is what most Episcopal clergy wear, as well as a lot of other clergy out there, too.) So, when I go to the gym during my work day, I have to get changed first. On this particular occasion, I did what I always do. I headed into the locker room with my gym bag. I got changed. I put my things in my locker, then I put my combination lock on it, and I went to have a workout.

So, an hour later, I come back to the locker room to get changed and I go to my locker. I put in the combination and pull down on the lock and nothing happens. It stays locked. Well, that's weird. So, I put in the combination again. Nothing happens. I put it in a third time, and you know this is a classic Master Lock like a lot of us had in school so you have to turn it twice around and stop on your first number and then change directions and go once around and stop on your second number and then – you know – to the third number. So, anyway, I put it in again and nothing happens.

At this point, as you can imagine, I'm getting a little bit frustrated. So I take a step back and look at things. Make sure I'm at the right locker. Yes, it all looks good. I double checked the combination numbers. Yes, got it. And I try it again. It won't open. That's how you end up watching a YouTube video on how to open a combination lock in a men's locker room. I'm kind

of going nuts at this point. I try it again and again and again and I'm getting nowhere. It's just more and more frustrating.

Finally, when I'm about to call a lawyer to file suit against Master Lock. Another guy, about my age comes up. He sees me struggling and he says, "Are you sure that's the right lock?" And I say, "Yeah, I'm sure. It's just not working." He says again, "Is it possible that you're trying to open the wrong lock?" I now turn and look at him, thinking, "What's this guy's problem?" And he spells it out for me, "Here let me try. I think that's my locker." And sure enough, he pops it open on the first try. He has a bit of humility on me and my red hot face, saying, "I think people move the benches around in here all the time. Yours must be that one" and he points to a black Master Lock that's like 7 lockers down. Well, sure enough. It opens right up.

I share all of that with you, not because I enjoy sounding like an idiot in front of you, but because I think that life is a lot like this story. Let's call it the Parable of the Gym Locker! The meaning of the parable would be that life is incredibly frustrating when you're trying to solve the wrong problems. Now, I know that you are all very capable, hardworking, and accomplished people. I'm not trying to imply that you're an idiot in a locker room or anything like that, but what I am saying is that we often spend tons of time and money and emotional energy trying to solve the wrong problems. To step into another metaphor, we each have our own mountains that we feel like we need to climb. We come to these trails very honestly as a result of our family upbringing and the experiences we have but so often we're not even on the right trail – we're not even climbing the right mountain.

You will have your own list as you look back over your lives, but there are some traps that are so easy for all of us to fall into as human beings. Jesus talks about a few of them in our Gospel reading today: Beware of doing things, even good things like church, and prayer, and being generous in order to be seen by other people. Beware of living your lives, Jesus says, so that other people are impressed with you. That applies to all of us, whether you are in the Greatest Generation or the Instagram Generation. Beware of living your lives for the approval of others.

"Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth," Jesus says, "where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasure in heaven, where moth nor rust consumes, where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." I think that we often want more money and we often rely on money because it gives us a sense of control. We think that the more money we have then the more control over our lives we get to have, also, and with that control comes influence and possibilities and pride. That's a false hope. It's a lot like needing to be strong, tough, and self-sufficient because if we are strong enough then we can handle anything and we probably don't need much help from others and definitely not from God. We won't find life in its fullest that way. It's so easy to ask the wrong question, or try to solve the wrong problem, or to try to unlock the wrong door.

There are two truths of the Scriptures that underpin everything we do on Ash Wednesday and in the Season of Lent. The first is that life is fragile and fleeting. We bring nothing into the world and we take nothing out of it. We have so little actual control or actual power. We are incredibly weak and incredibly small and we are incredibly broken people. “We are but dust,” the Psalmist says (Psalm 103:14).

(Pause)

The second truth is that God loves – LOVES – to work with weakness. It’s that for so many of us realizing that we can change nothing has meant seeing that God can change us. We are but dust, yes, and God has molded us from the dust of the earth. We are nothing and we have a God who finds “*nothing*” to be his favorite building material. Paul writes joyfully today in 2 Corinthians, that they are people “as having nothing, and yet possessing everything” because of the abundance of God’s grace (2 Cor. 6:10).

The right problem to work on today and in the weeks ahead is how to be more open to God and to each other. How do we learn to rely on God more and to receive the gifts of life in Christian community more? We won’t be able to get there by our own strength. We can’t buy our way in. **There’s no amount of strength** that will allow us to rely on God and each other more. The key to learning to work on that right problem of relying on God and each other **is your brokenness. The really hard things that you go through: your difficult upbringing, your struggle with addiction, your financial woes, your grief or loneliness or fear of not belonging – all of the things about you that you feel ashamed of or overwhelmed by are the materials of God’s grace. When you’ve been humbled by life – by your own foolishness or the circumstances you find yourself in – then God is nearby; God is at work in you; God chooses to work with our weakness far more often than with our strength!**

The Church believes this so completely – and the Scriptures report it again and again – that we have an entire day, even an entire Season, when it’s okay to be broken, to be not enough, to be out of control. We discover our brokenness at different times in life whether we like it or not – you’ve all been there – but now we enter into this deep reality of our limitation whether we are feeling it or not. So let’s just be honest about it now. We are incredibly broken people. We sometimes do really foolish things and sometimes really terrible things happen to us and wound us. We are not okay. We desperately need help. I don’t know how long you can hold onto that truth for, but hold onto it for as long as you can. Hold onto it for the rest of this service or the rest of today or the rest of Lent or the rest of your life. Let’s just admit it right now. Be broken with me today and with each other. And let God be God and do with us all the things that only God can do.