

Ash Wednesday
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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In my twenties, I got into an argument with a friend. We had been buddies in graduate school, and over the course of a month or so, we had a falling out. I'll spare you the details, but on sober reflection, I think the fight was more my fault than his. In short order, I found myself angry, hurt, sad, and a little bit afraid. In my anger, I didn't talk to him for a few weeks. I didn't mean for there to be an estrangement, but as my anger drained away, it was replaced by shame about how I had acted. It was simply easier to not pick up that phone.

Before I knew it, the weeks had turned to months, and the months had turned into a year and a half. We had seen each other at a wedding, which was incredibly awkward, and even then I couldn't quite muster the courage to say hello or to apologize. After about 18 months of stewing, something kind of shifted in me, and I knew it was time to make the phone call.

So, I did. On a warm day, I sat on my back porch in the sun and made the call. He was surprised to hear from me, I could tell. And I mainly just said that I was sorry about our fight, and I was particularly sorry about how I had handled it, or, really, not handled it for a year and a half. I said I was sorry that I had let time, that most precious commodity, slip away. And he was gracious to me. He seemed to understand why it had hit me so hard and why I needed to stay away. And, in the end, we reconciled. And, amazingly, the next time we saw one another, our friendship was able to resume — a bit changed perhaps, but stronger and better for the deep reconciliation we had experienced.

That story came into my mind when I read the Epistle for Ash Wednesday. In it, Paul writes to the people in the church at Corinth two thousand years ago, and he says, "Be reconciled to God." What a bizarre exhortation. How could we possibly become reconciled to the creator or all things — the ruler of heaven and earth? And yet, that is exactly what Paul is urging us to do.

When I read those words, "be reconciled to God," I thought about my friend. And the time I spent feeling like our friendship had been severed. Specifically, I thought about the weeks and months that I stayed away from our friendship — out of hurt, or shame, or even ignorance... literally not knowing what to do. And I wondered if it is the same with God.

How do we get ourselves out of right relationship with God? How did the people in the church at Corinth get themselves out of right relationship with God? The whole church year — the entirety of scripture — is about the ebb and flow of our divine relationship. Something about the human condition causes us to stray away from the relationship with our maker. This is true in every generation; it is true of every person and every community. Something in our make up causes us to choose the things that are not of God — greed, power, idols, things.

I think our distance from God is, like my distance from my friend, self-imposed. Maybe it's fear, or anger, or shame. I don't know. But there is some reason why the saints and mystics and prophets ask us to return to the Lord. Ask us to be reconciled to God, in the words of St. Paul.

Maybe, at the end of the day, it's as simple as finally making that phone call that you really need to make. But the church likes its ceremony, and the church encourages us to use gorgeous symbols to make difficult points.

And so we put ashes on our foreheads. Because that was the sign in ancient Israel of grief and mourning. We are mourning the separation between us and our God. We have ritualized the sensation of estrangement, hopefully so that we can better understand the feeling of reconciliation.

I can tell you, that when my friend understood why I had been distant, and he forgave me absolutely my sin, there is no feeling quite in the world like it. It was as if the sin no longer existed. And that is our hope during Lent. While we examine our hearts and our individual and collective conscience, our hope is to arrive at Easter ready and able to receive the Divine forgiveness. God doesn't need forty days to make God's way to us; we sometimes need the forty days to make our way back to God. And so we will do that, with ashes on our heads, together. Be reconciled to God, in the words of St. Paul. Amen.