

Daniel Waldschmidt – Ash Wednesday – Isaiah 1:1-4, 10-18

Our theme for the service today is that the Lord Seeks Sincere Worship. During the season of Lent we have an increase of worship opportunities. We have our regular Sunday morning worship and we also have special services on Wednesdays. And so it's a good time to think about worship and how the Lord wants sincere worship. What is sincere worship? Today we are going to look at three characteristics of sincere worship. 1. Sincere worship receives God's Gifts. 2. Sincere worship confesses sin. 3. Sincere worship produces fruit.

First, sincere worship receives God's gifts. In our Isaiah lesson, the LORD was not accepting the people's worship. **"The multitude of your sacrifices— what are they to me?" says the Lord. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats." (Isaiah 1:11)** Obviously the Lord is not pleased with their offerings! The thing that is a little puzzling is that *the LORD* had commanded the people to bring these offerings. And now the Lord is saying, "I don't have any pleasure in your burnt offerings"! **"When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts?" (Isaiah 1:12)** Again, it was the LORD himself who had told them to assemble for worship. Every year there were three very special festivals for worship and the LORD commanded them to attend and the Lord told them to assemble every Sabbath day for worship. And yet now God says: **"New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations— I cannot bear your worthless assemblies. Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals. I hate with all my being." (Isaiah 1:13-14)**

They were bringing offerings. They were assembling for worship. They were doing the actions which God had told them to do. Why was God not accepting their worship? One reason is that they had come to see worship as a burden that they grudgingly carried out.

On this Ash Wednesday how can we avoid seeing worship as a burden? Well, it helps to recognize all of the blessings the Lord gives us in worship. When the people of Israel saw all those sacrifices as a burden, they forgot that those sacrifices were meant to point them forward and remind them about the sacrifice that Jesus would make on the cross for the forgiveness of all their sins! And the Lord also gives to us many gifts in worship.

For example, at the beginning of the service, after we confess our sins and ask for forgiveness, the pastor, by the authority of Jesus Christ, says that your sins are forgiven. That's a gift that God gives to you in worship. Then we read from the Bible and in the Bible God tells us what he has done for us in Christ Jesus. Like in our second lesson: **"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Cor 5:21)** When we have the Lord's Supper, God gives you another gift, Jesus gives you his only body and blood and says, "This is for you for the forgiveness of sins." When we have a baptism or whenever we say, "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," it reminds of our own baptisms when God washed all our sins away. These are all gifts that God gives to you in worship. Sincere worship comes to receive God's gifts in faith.

So that's the first thing, sincere worship receives God's gifts. Secondly, sincere worship confesses sin. Another reason that God was not accepting their worship was because of their unrepentant sin. They were mistreating their fellow man and then expecting God to still accept their worship. But because they were mistreating their fellow man and because they were not sorry about it, God would not accept their worship. **"When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you; even when you offer many prayers, I am not listening. Your hands are full of blood! Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. <sup>17</sup> Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow." (Isaiah 1:15-17)** They can see how they were mistreating one another. God

says **“Your hands are full of blood! ... Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong.” (Isaiah 1:15)** God wanted them to repent of their sins of mistreating one another.

Sincere worship confesses sin. Sincere worship doesn't make excuses for sin. Sincere worship confesses sin. On Ash Wednesday, we confess to the Lord the things that we have done wrong. And we tell the Lord that we are sorry for the things we've done wrong.

It's hard to admit when we have done something wrong. But we don't need to be afraid to admit that we have done wrong, because the reason Jesus came is to save sinners. Jesus said, “I didn't come to call the righteous but sinners.” Are you a sinner? Is it bad? Then Jesus has come to save you. So repent of your sins. Be sincerely sorry for them. Confess your sins and turn to Jesus for forgiveness. Because Jesus sinners does receive.

Listen to what God says: **“Come now, let us settle the matter. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow, though they are red like crimson, they shall be like wool.” (Isaiah 1:18)**

God cleanses you of all your sins in the waters of holy baptism. Ephesians 5 says that **Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her<sup>26</sup> to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word,<sup>27</sup> and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.** Just like water washes dirt away, in the waters of your baptism, Jesus washed your sins away and made you pure and clean. In the book of Acts, Ananias told Saul, better known as Paul, **“Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away.”** Baptism washes your sins away by connecting you to Jesus.

All of the dirt of all your sins was taken off of you and placed onto Jesus: **“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Cor 5:21)** All the dirt of our sins was put onto Jesus and we were clothed with the bright clean robes of his righteousness.

God cleanses you of all your sins in the blood of Jesus. The book of Hebrews says that **“The blood of Christ cleanses our consciences.” (Hebrews 9:14)** The blood of Christ cleanses our consciences. During lent we get to see Jesus shed his blood for us on the cross to cleanse our consciences from guilt.

So sincere worship receives God's gifts, it confesses sin and finally, sincere worship produces fruit. **“Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.” (Isaiah 1:17)** It's always a temptation to offer God outward acts of worship but then neglect practical deeds of love. In his earthly ministry Jesus constantly pointed this out. He said to the Pharisees: **“Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone.” (Luke 11:42)** Jesus liked to quote the saying of the prophet Hosea: **“For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.” (Hosea 6:6; Matt 9:13; 12:7)** Jesus isn't against formal worship. He's against substituting formal worship for acts of kindness. He's against doing acts of formal worship *instead of* showing love and kindness to our neighbor. Sincere worship does both.

And of course another fruit of sincere worship is to amend our lives. On Ash Wednesday we don't act really really sorry on the outside, but then on the inside have every intention on continuing those same sins. To say that we are sorry for our sins but then have no intention of changing is not sincere worship. Sincere worship is to ask God to create us anew so that rise up from the ashes and live a new life. The good news of Jesus' full and free forgiveness inspires us to live a new and holy life.

And so during this season of Lent which begins today, let's show God sincere worship. Let's come to worship to receive his gifts, let's confess our sins and God will cleanse us from them, and let's offer God the fruit of repentance so that our entire life is an act of sincere worship. Amen.