

The Lord's Message: Deny Self, Take Up Your Cross, and Follow Jesus: Soul Check

Date: February 22, 2023

Where: Tilghman UMC

Scripture Reference: 2 Corinthians 5:14-6:2

We are beginning The Season of Lent. Lent begins today, Ash Wednesday. I believe that The Season of Lent is a time in the liturgical, or church, calendar for a *Soul Check*. Just as we should have a complete physical once a year for our bodies, it is the same with our souls. Actually, we should do a soul check every day. Lent reminds us where we may have neglected to do this. After all, the Bible tells us that dust we are and to dust we will return. In other word, our bodies will all go in the grave unless Jesus returns. The only part of us that passes through the door from death to eternity is our souls. In **1 Corinthians 6:19-20**, we are told that we should take care of our bodies because that is where the Holy Spirit resides. How much more that we should take care of our soul, because that is the only part of us that goes on to eternity. One of the questions that John Wesley asked at society meetings is, "How is your soul?" So, it is important for us to do a *Soul Check*. Each Sunday, during Lent we will be learning how to accomplish this.

Let us pray.

Where to begin? We begin with our understanding of God. In verse 16, we are told that we have changed our mind in regard to God and Jesus Christ. The world regards God as being non-existent and Jesus simply being a wise person. If you regard God as being non-existent then you have made the creator null and void and the only way that you can explain how all things were created is by evolution. That we evolve from cells. If you regard God as being non-existent, then you regard yourself as being in control, you become God. That is how the serpent tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Listen to **Genesis 3:1-5**. Since that time humankind has known good and evil, but our fallen human nature wants us to always pursue evil. I am in charge. I will do what I please. You can not tell me what to do. Our fallen human nature is at war with God, our creator. Self wants to have complete control.

We are a mess. Is there any help? Yes, we can be reconciled to God. It is not what we do, but what God has done for us through Jesus. In verses 18-19, we are told that God has done the reconciliation through Jesus. Our sins, though they are many, are not counted against us because of Jesus' death.

We have been changed from death to life. Paul describes this change as a new birth or new creation in verse 17. This is part of our baptism covenant service. We die to self and rise to Christ. We ask God to bless the water, "Pour out your Holy Spirit, to bless this gift of water and those who receive it, to wash away their sin and clothe them in righteousness throughout their lives, that dying and being raised with Christ, they may share in his final victory," (page 36 in the UM Hymnal).

If we were to think that this makes us better than others, then we would be sadly mistaken. We would be receiving God's grace in vain. Paul tells us in chapter 6: 1. Instead of pride of self, we should have gratitude to God. Paul says in chapter 6:2.

Now that we are reconciled to God, God gives us a new name, Ambassadors. Paul says in chapter 5:20. The word Ambassador means an accredited diplomat sent by a country as its official representative to a foreign country. Our world keeps becoming more foreign from God and God's plan for creation. As people reconciled by God and His Son Jesus Christ, we are sent into the world to be God's diplomat or Ambassador. We are called to show God's love to the ones that are hurt, are depressed or in despair, to the ones that are being abused or used, and to the ones that are searching and do not know where to search to find God. We who are reconciled to God are called to be Christ's Ambassadors. It begins with a *soul check*.

During this service there will be a time for you to come forward and to receive the ashes that will be placed on your forehead in the form of a cross. The ashes represent the palms that were cut and used to praise Jesus when He made is triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Of course, the end of that week, He would give His life for us, so that we could be reconciled with God. This also represents our fragile existence. The cross represents that willingness of God's love to be poured out on us and our sins to cover our sins by the blood of His own Son, Jesus.

I want to close this message with a true story. On the Sunday before Ash Wednesday in 2003 in Kuwait, the central dining facility in Camp Udairi caught on fire. The flames quickly engulfed all five tents and completely destroyed everything in less than 30 minutes. Thanks be to God that all the soldiers and civilians had made it out of the tents. No one was killed. It happened just as the Protestant worship service was concluding and before the start of a Catholic worship service. Just before the next Sunday, the Chaplain Sherer was thinking about the ashes left from the fire. She came upon a brilliant idea to use the ashes from the fire for the Ash Wednesday service. She had an MP get her a cup of the ashes from the fire. Two days before the service, she thought that maybe there would be chunks of wood and other materials that had not been consumed in the fire. So, she sifted her hands through the ashes and to her surprise all had been consumed except for this piece of metal. As she removed the burnt ash from the metal, she could see that it was in the shape of a cross. On the cross, was printed, "Jesus is Lord!"

We wear the cross of ashes not because of some symbolism of our own pride, but because we acknowledge that we are sinners and Jesus reconciled us to God by dying on the cross for our sins. We are dust and to dust we will return. Amen.