

Ash Wednesday, Epistle, Year A

SURE, THERE IS BAD NEWS, BUT WAIT, I DO HAVE GOOD NEWS

2 Corinthians 5.20b-6.10

Ash Wednesday

Analysis by Timothy Hoyer

We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.²¹ For our sake God made Christ to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Christ we might become the righteousness of God.

⁶As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. ²For he says,

‘At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.’

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! ³We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, ⁷truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

DIAGNOSIS: God Is In His Heaven, and All Is Right with the World

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Don’t Tell Me I’m Wrong

If someone walked up to us and urged us to be reconciled to God,

the response might be, "What? You want me to be reconciled to God? Why? I thought everything was fine between God and me. After all, I thought God was love." That's being polite. Probably we would get defensive, get a little angry, and tell the person to go away and mind their own business. People do pretend that God and they are fine. If there is anything wrong, they'll pray. There is no perceived need to be reconciled to God.

People are also using their energy to get through the day, to manage life, to survive, to figure out how to get some food for supper, or how to get to work because the friend who drives them to work had their car break down. No one has time to deal with balancing the books with God, that is, to reconcile them and their lives with how God expects them and their lives should be.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Faith Is In the Wrong Thing

Yet people fear they have to be good enough, good enough to get a job, good enough so their partner smiles at them; good enough at cooking a meal so people are pleased, good enough to have their sports team win; good enough to have friends or good enough to keep them or to be included. People fear that they have to have a good enough life to get life after death. People have their hearts trapped by luck, or their hearts are trapped by "everything happens for a reason." Their hearts are trapped by "Life is what it is." Their hearts fear this life and if they can keep managing it, if they can keep making it through each day. Handling this life is all that matters. There is nothing else.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): It Is Not All Right with the World

Being reconciled to God doesn't matter. No one feels that is something they need to do to get through the day. And yet, when

the day is done, "as each day dies with sleep," they will notice, if it is pointed out to them, that they judge how the day went. They look back on the day and check to see if the good parts of the day were more or less than the bad parts of the day. They will check how well the day behaved, trying to reconcile the day with the demand that it be a good day. The same thing will happen as they wait to die, even if it is only a few moments as the heart attack kills them. They will try to reconcile their life with the demand that it be a good life. Death, however, is the judgment that hearts that fear just this life have feared the wrong thing. They failed to fear God. Death is God's judgment, God's verdict on whether or not we have lived up to God's demands to be good enough. Obviously we failed.

PROGNOSIS: Jesus Is on a Cross and All Is Forgiven in the World

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): The Failure of Christ Is Our Success

Wait! Wait! Let me finish! I have good news! Such news of failure can only be told because there is news that overturns that failure. God has made Jesus the failure. God has made Jesus to be no good. God has made Jesus' life turn terribly wrong. And yet Jesus, by his death on a cross, his failure, Jesus promises us that because he failed, we now have all the goodness of God (the righteousness of God). This is God's wisdom that sounds foolish to us. No matter what our judgment on our life is, no matter God's law's judgment on our life, Jesus' judgment is that we are good to God because of his say so. Do not doubt it, for Jesus overcame death, failure, judgment, condemnation, by rising from the dead! It is not just this life that matters.

Step 5. Advanced Prognosis (External Solution): We Are Given Faith in Jesus, the Right Person

Be reconciled to God! That is, trust Jesus' promise to give you the goodness of God. Trust Jesus' declaration that you are good

to God. God will listen to Jesus, will take Jesus' word for it that we are good. God will have death's verdict of us and God will have Jesus' verdict on us, two opposites. How does God balance them out? How does God put them together? He takes Jesus' word for it that Jesus died and rose for us. That is how God reconciles us. He goes by what Jesus has done and by what Jesus says about us. Jesus' word is all that matters to God.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Let Me Tell You that You Are Good

The demand, the pressure to have a good life, to be a good person, to accomplish noteworthy activities, is now gone. We are free from having to make something of our lives. Our lives have been made in Jesus. No longer do we have to judge others, condemn them, belittle them, abandon them because we disagree with them. No longer do we have to make remarks about the differences in people, such as the color of their skin, the length of their hair, their culture, or what country they come from. We are free to help others have enough to eat. We are free to help others get the medicine they need. We are free to encourage others, to let others go first, to let others get the praise. God who sees all things knows what's in our hearts, and our hearts have Christ crucified. So dress me with ashes and I will be clothed with glory. Smear a cross on my forehead and I will be clean. Trouble me with judgment and I will have Christ's peace through his forgiveness. Rather, trouble me with your wrongs and I will give you Christ's forgiveness.