

The Rev. Dr. David K. McIntosh
February 18, 2026- Ash Wednesday
Given at Christ Church Quaker Farms, Oxford, CT

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Psalm 103; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” †

This evening’s epistle to the Corinthians highlights St. Paul’s struggles in that community and his battle with the ‘super-apostles’ who boast of strength and power. Paul’s point is very clear: it is in weakness that we find strength.

This evening’s entire service is a reminder of our human frailty, of our human sinfulness, and of our mortality. Indeed, in a few moments, we will have ashes on our foreheads as a reminder that we are dust and will return to dust. It’s a symbolic act, not intended to show others how pious or religious we are. It’s a *personal act* meant to remind us, in a way that is specific to each of us, that we are mortal (wash it off if you want before you leave). It’s a *symbol* to remind *you*, not others, that you’re fallible, capable of wrongdoing, of hurting others... it’s meant to be a reminder that we are imperfect and often ‘sin.’ That word (‘sin’) in Greek, used throughout Matthew’s Gospel, *hamartano* (αμαρτανω),— comes from an archery term and means ‘to miss the mark.’ When we fall into sin, we fall away from God’s will in our lives, and we have somehow ‘missed the mark.’

Soon we shall pray together Psalm 51, which highlights what it means to spiritually grow:

- to be willing see ourselves as we are, as God sees us
- to focus on our relationship with God and feel God’s loving presence
- to admit to ourselves where and when we have failed to respond to God’s love... when we have ‘missed the mark.’
- to be aware of God’s steadfast love and forgiveness
- to know that God can ‘blot out’ our iniquities, our sins, God forgives and forgets

Paul stresses this amazing quality of our God to forgive— that God’s love and forgiveness of Paul’s weaknesses and faults are what gave him faith and made him strong.

‘I am content with weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ... for whenever I am weak, then I am strong’ (2 Cor 12.10). Paul does not change his behavior or who he is in response to what other people are saying about him. He reminds us that God choose to work in this world through foolishness and weakness (at least as society would measure).

The words of the prophet Joel also make it clear: ‘Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord your God...’ So, Lenten acts of self-sacrifice, prayer and fasting are not about trying to impress anyone, not even God. They are meant to help us follow God’s ways... to help us venture closer toward God and become more like God.

Jesus’s act on the Cross, his willingness to suffer and die for others... that act of divine love, tells us something of how God wants *us* to act... the ‘cruciform’ (that is, cross-like) principle of *power*

made perfect in weakness is so counter-intuitive, so counter-cultural, it's hard to grasp. And it's what we are called to embrace this Lent.

Most of us spend so much time, effort, and money just trying to keep hidden those things we are afraid others think are foolish— like our physical appearance, our level of education, our financial status, our sexuality, our health, or our societal status. We buy things, surround ourselves with beautiful people, seek positions of authority, titles, degrees, new jobs, only in vain efforts to feel stronger and better. But listen again to what Paul says about this: “We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see— we are alive... as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.”

For Paul, each negative has a positive aspect; every hardship and weakness enable the formation of a strong and life-giving faith, a faith in God that is freeing.

Trust in the love and forgiveness of God in the midst of our cruciform world... a world full of Crosses and suffering. Be willing to be humble and ordinary, rather than important, to be vulnerable, rather than in control, to be loving, rather than powerful. Embrace the cruciform way of our God, as the means to new life! †