

Writing on the Board
The Rev. Amy Spagna
Ash Wednesday – February 22, 2023
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

When I was in the 5th grade, our school decided to implement a new scheme to help teachers manage classroom behavior known as "assertive discipline." (Some of you old teachers might know what that is.) It involved incremental penalties for students who didn't do what they were asked to, and used public shaming as a deterrent. The first infraction got your name written in a special corner on the blackboard for all to see. Each subsequent time the teacher had to comment on your behavior, it earned a check mark next to your name, and additional penalties like having to write "I will not talk in class" fifty or a hundred times, having to wait five minutes longer than the rest of the class to go to lunch, or receiving that dreaded phone call or note home to your parents. Needless to say, you didn't want to end up with your name on the board at all. That it was there, for all to see, just about guaranteed the other kids would talk about you behind your back, and not in a nice way. And, second of all, it was a visual reminder that you'd messed up that day or week, and needed to change your ways, or else.

Ash Wednesday seems a bit like that assertive discipline procedure in some ways, doesn't it? The ashes themselves – which are made from ground up palms from last Palm Sunday and mixed with a few drops of olive oil to help them stick together - are a mark that we are mortal, and haven't always acted very well. Fortunately, they don't mean that we're about to be sent to the principal's office. They're there to remind us that making mistakes is part of what it means to be human, and that we can ask for God's help and forgiveness when we do. We call that process of turning back and

receiving reassurance that we are OK *repentance* and *forgiveness*. Repentance and forgiveness are part and parcel of this season of Lent. And, unlike what happens when our names get written on the blackboard, there's no need to wait for the teacher to catch us doing something wrong – we can do it ourselves, and that phone call home isn't nearly as painful or embarrassing as we think it will be.

It's from this place of being proactive that we find St. Paul writing today. What's known as the second letter – which scholars think may actually have been the fourth one - he sent to the Church at Corinth is meant to remind them of the urgency of the situation they've found themselves in when it comes to actually participating in God's ongoing appeal for people to be reconciled with one another. In his estimation, they've come up short, not only in recognizing it, but actually doing it: "For 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" (2 Cor. 6:2, NRSV, emphasis added).

Paul's point is that we need to remember, not only Whose we are, but the sacrifice that got us here in the first place. We can't take the gift of forgiveness it brought us for granted, or "as if God's mercy and grace were reduced to an automatic Pez [candy] dispenser readily available at the request of the petitioner. Once again, Paul admonishes the Corinthians 'not to accept the grace of God in vain' (2 Corinthians 6:1). They were doing this by living in a manner that nullified the grace of God that had been bestowed on them, and we would do well not to follow in their ways."¹

¹ Sammy Alfaro, "Commentary on 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10." <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/ash-wednesday/commentary-on-2-corinthians-520b-610-16-2> [accessed February 20, 2023].

Today is but the beginning of making the changes required to prevent following in their ways – that is, in the same way of some of the Corinthians who felt entitled and took God's grace for granted. That's the literal meaning of repentance – or metanoia in Greek. It's a total life change that requires us to turn back in a Godward direction as the first step. The black mark of the ashes for those who choose to receive them is the outward sign of the beginning of this change. It's not that God is writing our names on the blackboard for all to see that we've behaved badly. Rather, they're intended to help us remember that not only are we mortal, but also that this enterprise of salvation is far bigger than any one thing we might have done or might have forgotten. It's cost God the life of God's only Son – to the end that all who believe in him may not perish, but have eternal life (John 3:16, NRSV).