

“Return to Me with Your Whole Heart”

Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

February 26, 2020

Ash Wednesday

“Even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart.” These words of the prophet Joel are the opening words of Scripture for this Ash Wednesday and for the season of Lent, and they set the tone and mood for us as we begin this holy season. “Return to me with your whole heart.” In so many ways, we drift away from our Lord during the course of our lives, and the world around us is happy to help. Sin creeps in and separates us more and more from the God who loves us. Again and again, we choose what is less, what is easy, what might satisfy us for a time. But this season of Lent reminds us: nothing can take the place of God, and he calls out to us: “Return to me with your whole heart.”

The symbol of ashes, which marks this day, is an ancient symbol of repentance. A penitent would sit in ashes and wear sackcloth as a sign of his repentance, his desire for God’s mercy. And that’s what we do here today. We accept the sign of ashes to remind us that we are in need of forgiveness and mercy. The ashes show us that all the things of this earth, which might be beautiful for a time, are passing and will ultimately turn to dust. Even our own bodies will turn to dust at the end of our earthly lives. And if that were all we had, then this would be a discouraging day indeed. But we know there is more. We know that we are made for eternity, for glory. The ashes we wear aren’t a cause for discouragement, but a sign of hope. We place our hope in the Lord who loves us and who wishes to offer us his mercy. We confess the guilt of our sins knowing that forgiveness from God can be ours if we reach out to accept it. The Lord says to each one of us today, “Return to me with your whole heart.”

It’s always a temptation in the season of Lent to start with a bang and with determination, but then to settle back into our usual way of doing things. The ashes wear off and we drift back into old patterns, even patterns of sin. But our Lord is challenging us in these forty days to change course, to leave behind whatever has drawn us away from him, and to return to him with our whole heart – our *whole* heart! Jesus didn’t abide halfway measures when he called his disciples. He wanted them to commit to him with their whole lives. And that’s what he wants of us too. “Return to me with your whole heart!” Even though the ashes fade, we always have the sign of the cross before us to remind us that Jesus didn’t take halfway measures. He gave himself entirely to us and for us, and he asks us to return to him entirely as well.

Every year on this day, we hear the Gospel we just heard, our Lord calling us to prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. These three ways are simply an invitation to remain close to the Lord. In daily prayer, we unite our hearts to his, we become one with him in spirit and allow him to touch the deepest part of our lives. Through fasting and sacrifice, we remember how much he has loved us, and we offer this sacrificial love back to him. We fast and recall that we are made for more than what this world has to offer. And by our almsgiving, our works of charity, we show compassion to a brother or sister in need, just as Jesus shows compassion to us. Sacrifice without charity is just self-directed, but by our works of kindness, we truly become one with our Lord. All of these disciplines are a way to heed the call to return to the Lord, not just in a superficial way, but with commitment, with our whole hearts. Jesus is stretching us, challenging

us to look beyond ourselves, and to remember that he has made us for himself, for heaven. By our prayer, and our fasting and almsgiving, we know the way to return to our Lord, not just part of the way but all the way, with our whole hearts, with our very lives.

Every year, the Holy Father gives us a message of encouragement as we begin the season of Lent. And this year he invites us: “Keep your eyes fixed on the outstretched arms of Christ crucified; let yourself be saved over and over again. And when you confess your sins, believe firmly in his mercy which frees you from your guilt.” As we receive ashes today, and as we begin our own personal journey of Lent, we know that God is truly merciful, and he will lead us if we seek him with our whole hearts. May this holy season be a time of grace for all of us, a time of repentance, a time of conversion, a time to return to the Lord.