

# Trinity United Methodist Church

## "Thoughts For Troubled Times"

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### First Sunday of Lent The Pastor's Thoughts

Matthew 4:1-11



This Wednesday past was Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the Christian observance of Lent. It is traditionally a communion service reminding us of the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross for our sins, and usually concludes with the imposition of ashes on the forehead of those communing. It is a sign of our recognition of our own sinfulness. In days gone by, less commonly today, there then began a period of six weeks where you not only contemplated your own sinfulness and the necessity of God's saving grace, but usually you made one or more resolutions of things that you would change, signified usually by giving up something for Lent, a reminder of Jesus' forty day fast in the wilderness. Growing up, my family gave up meat from Ash Wednesday until Easter Sunday morning (if you wonder why I dislike fish!). That latter practice, giving up something as a reminder and a symbol, has become less common in our modern age as we grow increasingly secular and attempt to mold religion to our lifestyle rather than the other way around. It's on the necessity of repentance, but not repentance alone, but repentance that leads to a changed life, that I'd like to focus on this week.

Few would argue that the world in which we live is imperfect, one could even say a sinful one. The church of Jesus Christ had, as its original mission, the winning of that world for Christ and the setting of the stage for the kingdom of heaven on earth. John Wesley, founder of Methodism, saw his society as afflicted with three primary sins: drunkenness, prostitution, and gambling; which he said were rife through all levels of society. His call to those he recruited was, in response, to "do all the good you can, everywhere you can, to all you can, as often as you can." Somewhere along the line we lost that vision. We live in what is arguably the greatest country on earth, not for its wealth or military power but for its diversity, opportunity, and promise. The statue of Liberty you might remember is emblazoned with the words, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore." We have abandoned that vision, casting off not only the huddled masses from afar, but increasingly segregating ourselves from each other so that we are becoming hostile communities gathered under an increasingly frayed common blanket. Consider: I recently heard a congressman (who shall remain nameless) suggest that we need to split (ala the Civil War) into conservative and liberal states! In a recent poll only 48% of the respondents believed that we should be providing aid to the Ukraine in their struggle to remain free; aid, I would remind you that is material goods, not American lives. We shouldn't be aiding people who are fighting a battle that one day we may have to fight ourselves, against the same foe? The "Proud Boys", the ultra-right paramilitary group that considered itself the spearpoint of the attempt to storm the capitol and overturn the election, believed they were reclaiming/preserving liberty and the voice of the people. Recent statistics show that the number of mass shootings in the United States has been steadily increasing since 2013. Let me say that I am a gun owner, have shot competitively, am a patron member of the NRA and a firm supporter of the second amendment. That having been said, this epidemic of gun violence is unacceptable. Do new regulations have to be considered or old ones rewritten? Yes, but the issue won't go away with removing the weapon, only the methodology will change until we change people's hearts and minds, the way we look at and deal with each other. Spiritually as a nation, we are in a crisis. Christianity is in decline, polls showing that the majority of churchgoers are over 60, most under 40 either go to church only occasionally or not at all, and a significant percentage of the population

doesn't believe in any higher power. The church of England (one of the largest Protestant bodies in the world) is facing a split over not only homosexuality, but over the gender of God! Really? The United Methodist Church is wrestling with the results of its own split; the Mormon Church is being forced by the government to pay back millions of illegally obtained funds, Jehovah's Witnesses are arrested for child abuse, and it goes on and on.

What to do? I don't profess to be smart enough to have an easy answer. I can say this: it's time, in this Lent, to do some serious introspection; to look at the state of our souls, what we believe, who we believe in, and what all that implies. As adverse to forcing our faith to bend to whatever our culture of the moment thinks is right (and this is nothing new, the same debate went on in our relations with Native Americans and over slaves during the Civil War), as adverse to "giving up" smoking, alcohol, certain foods, etc., perhaps we need to once again focus on doing what we are saying we are doing, that is, following the example and teaching of Christ! Can social involvement and spirituality come together? Actually the real question, is whether they can ever be separated. Justice without mercy, or mercy without justice--or either without spiritual humility--are biblically impossible. Ever since the Garden of Eden, mankind has bounced between extremes. Without God's guidance and decrees providing balance and sanity, human nature destroys itself. The message of the prophet Micah is a powerful appeal for Christians to forge the bond between inner principles and outward conduct. Micah 6:8, the "Micah Mandate," gives a balanced answer to today's spiritual and political questions. "What does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." How many of our daily actions, our governmental policies, our personal decisions, would pass that relatively simple test? It's not easy to love everyone; I'm reminded of that every time I go to the store or drive a local highway, yet God loved me enough to send his Son to die on the cross for me. Admittedly my beliefs are on the conservative side; I believe that one day I will stand before God to be judged. The only way I will escape damnation is through the intercession of Jesus Christ. I have to live, to do the best of my ability, in a way that measures up as much as possible to that love and grace. What about you? Think about it this Lenten season.

*Pastor Mike*