

Distended

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
on February 14, 2024, Ash Wednesday,
with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

I.

It's Ash Wednesday, the day in our Christian year when we consider the truth of our finality and fragility: that 'from dust we came, and to the dust we shall return.' Into such a landscape, this night begins the six week journey of Lent that will lead us to the cross of Christ. The word "Lent" comes from the Old English word for "lengthen," which can also mean 'spring season.' Even as we remember Lent's light gift – and hear that Phyllis Tickle once called Lent, "the days of greatest calm in the church's year"¹ – it could be easy to hear of dust and feel the sting of suffering and sacrifice. It could be logical to assume that Ash Wednesday in all its dustiness becomes the invitation to a barren, dry, wilderness season.

Yet perhaps we'll set that assumption aside in the spirit of our year of "tending." This year, we've talked about our callings to be people of nurture and keeping, of attending to the things and people and communities within our care. Perhaps you remember that the word "tend" comes equally from two Latin roots: "tenere," meaning to hold or grasp; and "tendere," meaning to stretch toward. It's the stretching part of tending that I want us to consider today, particularly the stretching **apart**, or distending, that can become common to our experience of life.

It's inescapable when you start paying attention to it, really. For the human life is full of distention, from the everyday to the exceptional. On the

¹ As quoted in *All Shall Be Well: Readings for Lent & Easter*, p85.

one hand, this... and on the other hand, that. One moment of a day, you might be feeling lonely... and then you seek out time with people and wish you had alone time instead. You wish desperately for relief – from parenting a toddler, or studying and writing papers every night, or caregiving for your aging parent – yet find yourself feeling oddly vacant inside when that relief actually comes, and the toddler becomes a teenager, and the degree program ends, and the parent passes on. You scroll from a video of Travis Kelce and Taylor Swift at the Super Bowl right to a video of the bombing in Rafah where over one million displaced Palestinians are sheltering. Day by day, moment by moment, you feel that the tent poles of this life keep stretching apart, distending what all you have to accomplish in a day, how to hold together your family members with different political views, what needs around you you can meaningfully fill. Even today – Valentine’s Day and Ash Wednesday in an overlapping 24 hours? “I love you, and we’re all going to die?” Makes perfect sense!

II.

I think that’s what Paul was naming to the church at Corinth in our passage for tonight. They’re a troubled church, and in this part of the letter, he is calling them back to the heart. Paul tells a bit about himself, his ministry, his motivations, and then he begins to speak of the contrasts present in a faithful life. Let’s swap his ‘we’s’ for ‘I’s’ and find ourselves in the text, here in verse 8. “In honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. I am treated as an imposter, yet am true, as unknown, and yet am well known; as dying – and see, I am alive; as punished and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet

possessing everything.” Do you hear the stretching apart, the contrast, the distended experience of the Christian life he describes?

We know these kinds of contrasts, don’t we? Again and again this Lent, we’ll hear them anew, for Jesus tends to these contrasts of life. “Those who want to save their lives will lose it,” he says, “and those who lose their lives for my sake will save it.” What will it profit to gain the world and lose a life?”²

Paul’s response? “Be reconciled to God.” Don’t try and make sense of the senseless. Don’t try and soften the sharp edges that cannot relent. Don’t try and reconcile the ends with the middle. No matter all the hardships that might come your way, be reconciled to **God**, Paul says. When you’re feeling distended, reach first to God. Start there, and the reconciliation with each other will follow.

This way of life is costly, self-emptying, and filled with risk. The easy road is lined with writing off, and canceling, and throwing away, and moving on, and ignoring. But the hard road, the *good* road is the way of reconciliation. Resurrection and new life is at its end, but it must get there by way of the cross: the bridge and site of ultimate reconciliation between Creator and created through Jesus, savior of us all.

III.

Perhaps you know that it’s a longstanding Christian practice to “give something up for Lent” or “add to our daily practices of faith.” Maybe in years past, you’ve found this practice to be a second try at some New Year’s resolutions, or a chance to try out a new spiritual self-improvement plan! No knocks on these – I’m still living into Lenten fasts in years gone by! – but I

² Mark 8:35-36

wonder if there might be a deeper expression of God's promise we lift up tonight.

This year, I wonder if your Lenten practices could measure their devotion – not by some idea about what a good Christian looks like, or what you should do because of an expectation you have carried, like you're carrying around some holy ruler upon which you can never measure up – but rather on the truth that *reconciliation* is the starting point. That God has already made peace with you, come close to you, been restored to you, reunited with you. That you don't have to earn it, or work for it, or seek after it. God has already come to you, and God's presence is already there, already yours. Among all the contrasts and polarities and distended places of your living, God doesn't have to be one of them. You can rest and be renewed in that knowing, letting God do what God does best. So what might it look like if you traded distended living for reconciled being?

Perhaps it might sound like this –

Because God has reconciled with me, I will use these days to reconcile back with God. And maybe in so doing, I'll find new reconciliation with my body: trusting its belovedness within the image of God, instead of eating my stress in snacks throughout the day, or pushing it to perform in an endless hamster wheel of work, or languishing in fear or paralysis for hour after hour in front of the TV at home.

Because God has reconciled with me, I will reconcile back with God. And maybe in so doing, I'll find new reconciliation with my mind: by loosening the grip I have over always being right, or softening the monkey mind of my anxiety into breath prayers and centering silence, or turning away from a

habit or lonely practice that always leaves me feeling worse after than before, tuning my attention away from all that distracts me and grabs me so that I can turn it instead to that which heals me and cares for me and lifts me to God.

Because God has reconciled with me, I will reconcile back with God. And maybe in so doing, I'll find new reconciliation within my relationships: saying no when people in my life diminish my sense of self-worth and yes to relationships which honor it, finding paths for peace where instead I may have chosen war,

God has already reconciled! Therefore, you might tell yourself: I'm passing on this sweet, or that beer, or this passive aggressiveness, or that gossip, or this habit, or that desire, or this obsessive worry, or that fearful action – not because I'm trying to make peace with and reconcile everything, but because God has already done that. Living from reconciliation not distention. Coming close, not pulling apart. Shaping the rhythms and practices of my day out of that truth. Trading self-rejection for God-shaped care. Exchanging self-criticism for God-shaped compassion. Relinquishing self-centeredness for God-shaped expansiveness. Tending our inner life with all the care and attention it deserves. Giving up all the shoulds, and the have nots, and the depravity so that we can add on the lush, abundant, unconditional, ever-flowing grace and mercy and love of God.

For 40 days, at least. And then, of course, perhaps for a lifetime. For this love is a love which rests in the very dust of which we were formed, carries us through the living of these days, and returns to God at the end of this life. It sticks and stays, far longer than these ashes will on our brow.

IV.

“I don’t know how long it had been since these two neighbors had talked to each other,” begins the story I’ve told you before from Asheville-based singer-songwriter David Wilcox. He goes on to tell about these two neighbors, property divided by a creek, who somewhere along the way had a falling out about a stray cat. “Just the dumbest reason,” Wilcox said. Both men were taking care of this stray cat and after a while, one of the neighbors took the cat into his house. Well the other neighbor thought that it was his cat, and so whenever the two talked to each other, they’d quickly begin yelling and wound up storming off until after a while, they just quit talking to each other at all.

One day a traveling carpenter came up to one of them out in the yard and asked if there might be any work he could do for ‘em. And the man said, “Yeah, I’ve got something for you to do. You see that house over there? Well that’s my neighbor; his property starts down there at that creek. So I want you to take this here pile of lumber and build me a fence, all along the water so I don’t even have to look at him. Could you do that for me?” A little surprised, the carpenter says, “Yeah, I could do that but I’ll need some more wood.

Why don’t you let me get started with what you have here, and you go on into town to get some more wood so I can finish the job?” So the man goes off to buy more wood, and as he’s bouncing back down the rutted dirt road, new lumber clacking around in the back of his truck, he looks out over that field to see where his new fence oughtta be. Only when he looks out over his property line, he sees that the carpenter has built not a fence, but a bridge,

with his wood. And before he can get down there, he sees his neighbor come out of his house and walk across that bridge, built with his wood, onto his land. Well that neighbor walks right up to him with his hand outstretched with a big ole' stupid smile on his face and says, "You're a brave man. I thought you'd never want to hear the sound of my voice again. I feel like such a fool. Can you forgive me?"

And then the man finds himself taking his outstretched hand and hears himself saying, "Aww heck, I knew that was your cat anyways." Then he sees the carpenter walking away and calls out, "Hey, I've got some more work for you if you need it." But the carpenter turns and says, "No, you'll be fine, I'm needed elsewhere."³

V.

In a moment, we'll impose ashes upon our brow, and *remember that you are dust*. Smearred into your skin, this mark of dust blesses and celebrates the earthen vessel through which love is known. This mark reminds you that one day this body will reach its end, but until then, it holds infinite possibilities of life. This mark means that throughout all the changing seasons of life, when all else fails, you belong to God, beloved and claimed and created in God's image and called very very good. This mark sears into your very body the reconciliation that God has already started in you.

When you feel the press of finitude, may you also feel the imposition of the future. Of hope. Of what will be. Of life. May you find your way back to God and be reconciled, today and every day.

³ David Wilcox, "The Carpenter Story," from the *East Asheville Hardware* live album, as introduced to me and retold by my dear friend, Scott Dickison. Original can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vwJur79mJDk>.

Remember that you are dust, friends! Be reconciled to God who sees you, the Christ who is our bridge, and the Spirit who welcomes you home again. Amen.