

We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

I'm not sure how familiar anyone is with the story of The Prince and the Pauper, but in this story the prince of England, Prince Edward, wants to trade places with a poor boy from town named Tom who happens to look like him. After they make the trade, the poor common boy, Tom, does have some difficulty adjusting to royal life, but he also has the added benefit now of being rich and having servants – things that he definitely wasn't going to get as a commoner. He ate well, learned all the things that a prince would learn, and actually almost ended up being king near the end of the story. Prince Edward, on the other hand, had to adjust to the hard life of a pauper. He saw the injustice of the real world – people found guilty on little evidence, the vast gap between classes, and he himself being ridiculed for being a crazy person because he claimed to be royalty. All in all, this was not a very good trade for the prince. He had given up the riches of the palace life to live among the common folk. He had given up the food, the clothes, the power of prince to see what a poor man's life was like.

We can probably think of a lot of bad trades like this, especially in the sports and business worlds, but also in our own lives. I remember a long time ago trading some Smarties Candy to my brother for one of his Lego sets (it was a Star Wars X-wing, so a really bad trade for my brother)...my mom didn't let that one last very long. You can probably see where I'm going with this idea – bad trades that people have made throughout history and Paul in the reading for today from 2 Corinthians talks about the trade that God makes for us.

As far as trades go we know this is as unfair as it gets. We see it here: God trading righteousness for sin. We were that sin. This is what we focus on as during this Lent season. We see the dust, the ashes that we are on Ash Wednesday, we see the meaning of these ashes, and we see that God still makes this trade...an awful trade.

I like the way Paul describes it as well. This trade has absolutely nothing to do with our actions. When Paul talks to the Corinthians he talks about Jesus' action. **"Be reconciled to God."** He's talking to us, but that's not something we can do on our own. It is something that is done for us.

We have just said that we were sin. During the Lent season we get to focus on humbling ourselves before God...what Ash Wednesday pointed to. We reflect on the humble state that we are in as sinners. In the Genesis account, after the Fall into sin, God describes sinful humans as dust: **"For dust you are, and to dust you will return."** (Gen 3:19)

And then we have to ask ourselves, what can dust do? There is no life there. If we see dust on the shelf, we obviously have to admit that no living thing is going all of a sudden rise up. Nothing will bust out of the ground and start talking and moving and dancing, much less start reconciling itself to or serving God. First of all it doesn't want to. I don't know a lot about what dust wants, but I think it's safe to say it doesn't want become alive. Then, even if it did want to, we know that it's not capable of any of these things.

That is the picture Paul leaves us with as he describes the trade that God made for us. We are dead as the dust – unwilling and, even if we were willing, unable to serve God. And maybe sometimes when we hear that we think that's not really fair for us. We want to serve God. We do a lot...we pray and come to church and help those in need. And maybe that's what these Corinthians were thinking, too!

But Paul is still writing to them; and this still applies to us. Our God chose to make Jesus, **“him who had no sin to be sin for us.”** He had to become sin for us. This is that story of the Prince and the Pauper...from him to us; riches to rags; righteousness to sin...Jesus was righteousness, we were sin. We were sin...that statement burns down all those proud thoughts we had and brings us crawling back to the ashes.

And still Jesus made that awful trade for us. A trade that if anyone looked at it – if my parents saw me trying to make that trade with my brother – they would force him to trade back. Isn't that the beautiful part about this trade? This awful trade is one that God wants to make, and doesn't want to take back – Jesus' righteousness for our sin. How awesome is that? We see that this bad trade – this awful trade – is actually an awesome trade – or awe-full trade.

What we read next makes us realize how awe-full this trade was. **“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”** We now are not only given this righteousness, we become this righteousness, just as Jesus was righteousness.

And again, as we focus on Ash Wednesday and what these ashes mean, we have to ask, what is this righteousness? It's not something we look at someone doing and say, that's nice. We can't pick out certain works of service even here at Trinity and say, “That's the righteousness of God.” Remember, Paul burns down all those thoughts of pride and self-accomplishment that we may sometimes think we have before God and leads us back to the dust, back to the humility we have before our Savior.

We focus on the meaning of these ashes, and the trade that God makes for us. Jesus gave up the riches and the glory so that he would bring this dust to life...so that we could have the riches and the glory of heaven – his righteousness.

Isn't that why we worship this Lenten season? We humble ourselves by using the ashes to help us remember that we are ashes and dust. We were made from this dust, and God tells us that to this dust we will return. But Christ is the one who brings this dust to life and makes us into a living being clothed in his righteousness.

Paul finishes this section by talking about what this means for us. **“Now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.”** We who are reconciled, now is the time for us! And this time is not just the day you were baptized, or a specific day that we pick out as the day we were

brought to faith. It's the time right here that God has given to us. Now is the time to live lives of thanks for him.

HE has made us alive in Christ. HE has reconciled us and made us right with God. HE has brought this pile of dust to life.

This is God's Great Exchange we are talking about here. **“As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain.”** During Lent we recognize the awe-full trade that our God has made for us and see that now is that time to ponder the message he has given to us and appreciate what he has done for us.

We keep our focus on this message during this Lent season, on the awesome, the awe-full work that our God has done for us. This season is designed to remind us how big of a deal God's work is for us.

We, who were formed from this dust, we who were sin, have been given a brand new life. He brought the ashes to life, something impossibly difficult, and impossibly awe-full. We have a new and glorious position before our God, something that God worked completely outside of us, given completely by God's grace. This dust and these ashes are now a glorious sight in God's eyes. They are covered with the righteousness of his Son – the righteousness of God. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard and keep your hearts and minds in true faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.