

[BLANK] Thank you for coming this morning, and thank you for your commitment to Christian faith in our season of Lent, the 40 weekdays and Saturdays from Ash Wednesday to Easter. In Lent, we have 40 days to fast from the habits that take us away from God, and 40 days to feast on the habits that bring us close to God. And then, on the six Sundays of Lent, we rejoice in our progress, and reflect on habits of discipleship that lead us to godly living.

We started our Lenten fasting and feasting on Ash Wednesday, when we are asked to return to God as God's dust, children of God, amazingly and wonderfully made by our Creator, who are meant to return to God, sooner, rather than later. We had a beautiful Ash Wednesday service, and I thank everyone who was able to attend it. As beautiful as it was, though, it is sad to reflect that the very same day that we were celebrating our return to God through faith, children and teachers in Florida were being murdered in a school, by a person who had lost his way in life. And so, as we reflect on our progress in Lent, we must first reflect on how pure hearts in faith are absolutely essential for us to return to the ways of God, so that we can act faithfully as disciples. Would you pray with me, please.

[PRAYER]

I have seen a lot of amazing discipleship in this church in the short time that I have been here. I have seen people deeply committed to the mission of this church, people who give generously of their time, their treasure, and their talent, whenever and wherever they can. [BAGS} Just the other day, I dropped off over twenty bags of canned soup, dry foods, and dishwashing detergent that people had collected in little over a week. The volunteers at the soup kitchen were amazed - including some volunteers from other United Methodist churches! [MOREBAGS] Earlier in the week, our United Methodist Women assembled and delivered beautiful bags for people in our family shelter, filled with toys to bring joy, and practical gifts. We are a church in mission, and it brings God's glory to this earth.

[CLEANING] But one of the most amazing things that I have seen in recent days in this church is a team of women devoted to cleaning this church from top to bottom. From our sanctuary, to our kitchen, to our classrooms, every square inch that could be cleaned has been cleaned. Our balcony is now a clean and well-organized space, and our winter village scene is tucked away safely in cabinets, while freeing up spare space in those cabinets! It is wonderful to see this happening, but even more wonderful to see the joy that these disciples bring to their work. This place sparkles not just because it's purified, but because of their pure joy! [BLANK]

If only purifying our hearts could be so easy. If only we could give to God the grime of our sins, the wounds that we carry from a sinful world, and make our hearts pure again, as easily as we could take some Murphy's Oil Soap to some woodwork. If only we could return to God, and surrender our hearts to be purified by God immediately, persistently, and insistenty, as simply and as surely as we wash our hands in the bathroom. We are devoted in this season of Lent to finding how we can let God purify our hearts. It is a simple task, but it is not always an easy task.

We know many things now about the tragic events at Parkland High School on Ash

Wednesday. The seventeen students, teachers, and staff who died, and the many others who were injured, were shot by Nikolas Cruz, aged 19, who was using one Smith & Wesson semi-automatic rifle, and dozens of ammunition clips. Nikolas Cruz is a young man who is clearly disturbed. By all reports, he is a young man who was addicted to thoughts of violence and hatred. In his confession of his crime, Cruz said that the devil himself was urging him to undertake this mass shooting.

In America today, an addiction to violence and hatred, such as that suffered by Nikolas Cruz, is quite common. Troubled families, such as the one that Nikolas Cruz grew up in, are quite common. Pressures to push such people over the edge, into the madness of such violent acts through their addictions, are quite common. And so, in our nation, it is sad to say, shootings such as the one suffered by the families of Parkland, Florida, are quite common.

It is not guns that are killing our children and fellow citizens. It is our addictions, and the many institutions that are devoted to feeding our addictions, that are killing them. Hearts that are not focused on seeking the purity of God's love are easily led into addictions, addictions that lead to sin. And hearts that are not seeking purity in the hands of God's love will see the work of the devil, freeze in their tracks, and give the devil the benefit of the doubt.

Not everyone is frozen in the face of sin. [VIGIL] We can thank the teachers and staff who responded with pure hearts at Parkland High School, and who saved many, many lives, through their acts of bravery. We can thank the students and families of Parkland High School, who put aside their temptations to freeze in their tracks, and rallied to speak out against the violence that had torn their community apart. [BLANK] Pure hearts are not frozen hearts. A frozen heart is a sinful heart, as much as a violent heart.

Noah did not have a frozen heart. In the middle of a world filled with incredible violence and sinfulness, Noah, a simple man, a humble man, a common man, a man who tried to love God, in spite of his very human limitations, responded to God's incredible challenge - to save a remnant of life from a terrible flood. Noah responded to God's call, and followed God's plan to build a lifeboat for his family and the creatures of God's creation, in spite of everything that a sinful world said against him. Noah, his family, and God's creatures, endured forty days of flooding in his boat, as God purified the earth. Noah was not perfect. But he was perfectly willing to seek God's purity, for God's sake, for his sake, and for the world's sake.

And when forty days were over, the rains stopped, the earth was purified, dry land returned, and hope returned. It was then that God made a covenant through Noah, a covenant that God would always trust that at least one pure heart would emerge from the world to respond to God's call for purity in the face of sin. The ages would come and go, but God would be steadfast in trusting that a pure love of God, and of all that God had created, could dwell in a human heart, for the sake of all of God's creation.

Thousands of years after Noah, a man approached the waters of the river Jordan for baptism by John, a prophet of Israel, who called his people to return to their God. John

asked people to purify their bodies in the waters of the Jordan, as a sign of their willingness to return to God. The man who approached John, though, was not just a man. He was Jesus, the Son of God, the purity of God's love in flesh. Jesus had no need of waters to purify his heart, but Jesus allowed John to baptise him, so that his human flesh would reflect his human will to follow God's ways.

Jesus fasted in the desert for forty days, just as Noah had fasted from the land for forty days in his boat, trusting in God. Mark's gospel tells us that wild animals surrounded Jesus in the desert, just as wild animals had surrounded Noah in the ark. Jesus was like Noah, but more than Noah. The devil himself could not tempt Jesus to sin, and angels surrounded Jesus to protect him. The heart of Jesus was as pure as pure could be. And so, God's covenant promise to Noah was fulfilled. The earth would always have a savior to remove us from our sins.

In Lent, we are called to return to God. In Lent, we are called to allow God to purify our hearts, so that we may act for God in a godly way. The consequences of us doing so are life and death, for us, and for God's world. God relies on Jesus to be the source of salvation for all of creation, and God relies on us to be disciples of Jesus who choose, day by day, moment by moment, to seek out the pure heart of God in Christ together. In our flesh, we are weak. But in Christ together, we can become strong together, as strong as only the pure heart of God can be.

We can rejoice in the pure love that God has given us in Christ. We can rejoice in the promise of pure love that we seek together in Christ. May we use this Lent to draw our hearts together in the purity of God's love, as we fast from sin, and feast on the ways of God, together. Amen.