We know what an imposition is: we do not like being imposed upon, and we try hard not to impose on the goodwill of others.

An imposition is something unjust: we did not ask for this.

An imposition is something unwarranted: we do not deserve to be treated this way.

An imposition is a something burdensome: we do not want this responsibility.

Ash Wednesday is all about impositions. In a few minutes we will impose ashes on our foreheads to remind us that we are “ashes and dust,” mortals whose life is finite, human creatures of a sovereign God. Smearing ourselves with ash is not something we typically choose to do, so the church imposes them upon us. The ashes are a visible symbol of our humility before God and a physical reminder of our lowly place in God’s Kingdom. We are servants of the sovereign God who rules over all, and it is good to be reminded of that from time to time. During Lent we reflect on our faith, correct any bad habits, and rededicate our lives to God’s service. The ashes imposed are a stark reminder of all that God imposes on us.

God imposed God’s will on us by giving us the Ten Commandments to guide our lives and relationships. God imposed God’s vision on us by making us God’s own people and “a light for the other nations” (Isaiah 42:6). God imposed God’s Self on us by sending Jesus the Christ to teach us how to be God’s children. God imposes God’s presence on us as the Holy Spirit who “provokes” us to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24). Why does God impose God’s Self on us? Why does God meddle in our affairs? Because if God did not, we would be nothing more than ashes and dust; nothing more than sinners without hope and without a future.

Fortunately, God sees us as more than ashes and dust. We are God’s beloved children. As children there are things our Divine Parent knows we need, things God imposes for our own good. And just what does God impose upon us? God’s imposes love and mercy. God’s imposes grace and favor. God’s imposes justice and peace. God’s imposes forgiveness and salvation. God’s imposes God’s vision of a world restored. Did we ask for these things? No. Did we earn them? No. Did we need them? Yes! God knew this, which is why God imposed them. God entered human life to make it better. God interrupted our “usual” way of doing things to offer a better way to live. God disrupted things to show us what we might become.

It is a good thing that God imposes some things on us, for left to our own devices, we would flounder in sin and sadness. God truly has our best interests at heart. As Paul quotes God saying, “At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you” (2 Cor. 6:2a). When we could not help ourselves, God helped us. In Jesus Christ, God became human; he died for the forgiveness of sins and rose again to offer the promise of new and eternal life. God did this for us, before we even asked for help, and so we are freed to serve, grateful for the new life God offers us.

Isaiah tells us how servants of God are to work in the world. We are to “loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke” (58:6). We are to share our bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into our house; when we see the naked, we are to cover them (58:7). Paul says not to wait to begin this work: “Now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!” (2 Cor. 6:2b).

Does this mean we are imposing God’s will on the world? Yes, it does! Like a loving parent, who insists that we eat our vegetables, and brush our teeth, and go to bed, and do our homework, God imposes some things upon us for our own good. The things that God asks us to do – love, feed, forgive, make peace – are things that will benefit the world. When we do these things, as Isaiah records, “your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly” (58:8a). God imposed these things on us to heal us; now we are asked to impose these things on the world, to heal the world.

Will the world like it? No. Like a child who pushes back against eating her broccoli, the world will resent our imposition. The world will throw all sorts of difficulties at Christ’s disciples: hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, sleepless nights, hunger, says Paul. But through purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God, we will win over the world to God’s better way.

Sometimes we must accept the imposition of others. A parent. A boss. A medical professional. An officer of the law who demands that we wear a seatbelt. We may not like it, but we know that it is the right thing to do. In the case of our God, bowing to the Divine Will helps us and heals the world. As those who know the surpassing greatness of God’s power and love, we accept God’s imposition as a blessing and eagerly impart it to the world. None of us likes to be told what to do; but on Ash Wednesday we are reminded of God’s incomparable goodness and mercy. May we accept God’s will for us and go out to serve as a light to the nations.

Prayer: Almighty God, You have set before us the path but we have wandered on our own to try to find our way. Sometimes we are like toddlers, and we hear Your call and come back. Other times, we are children testing boundaries, ignoring Your call until fear finally makes us look back. And still other times we are full of youthful rebellion, demanding to be cut loose and set free, not knowing how much we still need to seek Your wisdom and guidance. But most of all, too often we think we are adults and have figured it all our and know our own way, only to stumble and stray so far. Remind us, parental God, that we are always Your children, that we are never fully grown up in Your sight, that we always have much to learn. Help us to seek You every day, to acknowledge that we need Your wisdom and guidance, and help us to return to the path and walk with You. In the name of Christ, who is our companion on this journey of faith, we pray. **Amen**.

**Such an Imposition**

Ash Wednesday, March 2, 2022 Isaiah 58:1-12

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Seat belts are a common and effective safety device. Seat belts save countless lives and prevent many injuries annually. Every car is equipped with seat belts; but that was not always the case. Seat belts first appeared in the 1930s; but it was thirty years until American automakers made seat belts a standard feature in their cars. In 1968, the federal government mandated that all new cars include seat belts at all seating positions; but making it mandatory to wear those seat belts was a slow process. Seat belt laws came about slowly, state-by-state. New York State imposed the first mandatory seat belt law in 1984. Minnesota imposed its own seat belt law in 1986. Now, every state in the union, except New Hampshire, has a mandatory seat belt law.

Growing up in New York State, I remember the controversy surrounding the mandatory seat belt laws. Whether to impose them or not was passionately debated in my high school English class. The argument *for* seat belt laws focused on the lives they would save. The argument *against* seat belt laws focused on the individual’s rights. As I recall, the classmate who argued against seat belt laws won the debate, as determined by the applause and catcalls of the high schoolers who championed personal liberties over safety. He won the debate because he tapped into a basic truth about human beings: No one likes to be told what they must do. We do not like to be imposed upon by others. Whether it’s wearing seat belts, or paying taxes or doing homework, we resent it when others impose their will on us.

An *imposition* is the “forcing of oneself, one’s presence or will on another without right or invitation.” When a guest asks to stay for one week, but stays for three weeks, that is an imposition. When a coworker demands that you do work which is assigned to them, that is an imposition. When your kid announces at breakfast that it is their turn to bring cupcakes to school TODAY, and their soccer uniform needs to be clean by 3:00 PM, and their science project of a working model of the universe is due tomorrow, forcing you to change your plans for the day, that is an imposition.