

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
Ash Wednesday
The Rev. Bonnie Underwood
February 10, 2016

We are Dust

Lent is a season of repentance and renewal, a time when we are encouraged to read and inwardly digest God's word, taking the time for self-examination and reflection. And in tonight's service, we will dispense ashes, a practice with ancient roots, reaching back into Old Testament times, when we hear of people covering themselves with sackcloth and ashes as a sign of repentance and mourning. This practice was carried into the early Christian community, becoming more formalized during the middle ages, and is still part of our Ash Wednesday liturgy today.

But why do we take this time to mark ourselves with ashes, to remind each other of our mortality? It's not something common in today's context, with our death-denying culture that seems to tell us that we can live forever if we just find that right combination of diet, exercise, and perhaps a bit of elective surgery.

And why do we need a season for penitence, for examining our lives and identifying our sins? Wouldn't this practice damage our self-esteem? And do we even have to worry about sinfulness, as long as we stay on the right side of the morality line?

We take the time for a holy Lent, because we seek the truth. Deep within us, we long for God's truth.

If we're honest with ourselves, we know there's no substance in our cultural false-attempts at immortality. Even with our growing medical and technological capabilities, we won't live forever. We are mortal. We are dust and to dust we shall return.

And we can't escape our sinfulness. No amount of self-help classes or willpower, determination or control, can separate us from our human nature, from the reality that even when we want to do what is good, we fail. As St. Paul said in Romans, "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

This reality of our human nature is described in today's Gospel lesson. Jesus talks about three important ways to express piety: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. Good things that can honor God and express our love of God and our neighbor.

But even these good things can become twisted, hypocritical, and sinful. For what is the real intent of our actions, the motivation behind these acts of good will? To honor God and care for others or, to gain power and glory in this world, recognition of just how wonderful we are? Are our hearts and minds focused on God or on ourselves, disconnected from belief and conviction?

Our own humanity fails us, again and again. Our human frailty causes us to routinely trip and fall.

Lent is a time, a season, to seek the truth, to examine our lives with as bright a light as possible, the light of Christ. With God's help, we can see into those dark corners, identify those hidden places within us that may be painfully holding us back, separating us from God and one another. Lent is the time to slice through our veil of self-delusion, the time to see beyond the world's false-

promises, the time to begin to recognize the who we really are. For we are all caught up in sinfulness which is complicated and messy, sinfulness that can twist even good things like almsgiving, prayer, and fasting into something that is hypocritical and self-serving.

What is so remarkable about Ash Wednesday and Lent is that through being marked with the cross and reminded of our own mortality and sinful natures, we are actually set free.

For God already knows the truth of who we are, understands that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. Our Savior delights in the truth that we are his own beloved children, in all our broken beauty. We can have faith in the Spirit, as she helps us find those places needing redemption and transformation, and helps us to open our hearts and find our way back to God.

As we receive these ashes, know that the God who created us sees the truth of both who we are and who we are made to be. And like the prodigal son, we too can trust in the truth of our Lord running with abandon to welcome us home.

Lean into this season. Find the time, create the space, to enter into a holy Lent, through study, self-examination, and reflection. For our Savior is reaching out to us, encouraging us to repent, and turn back towards him.

Bless the Lord, my soul. For the Lord forgives all our sins, and heals all our infirmities, redeems our life from the grave, and crowns us with mercy and loving-kindness.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless the Holy Name.

Amen.