

Ash Wednesday, March 1, 2017

Holy Spirit, Cumming

Ash Wednesday is an important holy day in the church's year. Unlike Christmas or Easter or Pentecost, there is not a biblical story that is the source for this day. Ash Wednesday evolved over the course of centuries in the church. It was intended to mark a final forty days (not counting Sundays) as candidates were being prepared for baptism at the Easter Vigil. People would begin more intense reflection and repentance as part of that preparation.

Over time, people in the church found that it could serve a wider purpose—people who had been excommunicated due to serious sin could join with the candidates for baptism and follow their practices of reflection and repentance as a way to be restored to the church. Eventually, all church member saw the value of this and came alongside those to be baptized and restored so that it would be a truly communal journey to Easter each year.

Grounded in that lovely history, Ash Wednesday serves a simple purpose for people of faith. It reminds us of three important facts about being human:

First, we all sin. Beyond individual sins we commit, we are part of a network of human frailty and pettiness and greed that reinforces and exacerbates our individual sins. We are sinners in a sense like we are members of an insidious club that is hard to ever leave. Two steps out the club door and we encounter or do something that draws us back in.

Second, we are mortal. We are all going to die. As the prayer book states it, "In the midst of life we are in death." That reality is ever present, but it is something most of us avoid reflecting upon. That is probably normal—we do not want to be maudlin. But it is also a good thing that at least once a year the church gives us time and space to reflect on our mortality.

A result of points one and two is the suffering we experience in the world—illness, injustice, ignorance. We see suffering in big and small ways—how we are harmed and harm others; how we fear and participate in a system that makes others afraid. It is easy to see and experience the suffering in the world and cry out, "What can we do?"

And that leads us to the third point—and this is the great good news of Ash Wednesday and Lent and the gospel of Jesus Christ: God loves us. Or as the opening prayer of this service states it, "God, you hate nothing you have made." In the midst of our suffering due to sin and death, the Lord has sent a message and a people to bear witness that God is with us and cares for us like a father cares for his children. That brings hope and comfort to us.

So what are we to do with these truths about being human? How can we incorporate them into a holy Lent? Here are some thoughts I hope to carry with me through the season and I offer them to you to consider as you pray and prepare for the joy of Easter and new life:

If we remember that we are all sinners, it can help us as we relate to others who let us down in big and small ways. Jesus talked about removing the log in our eye before getting the splinter out of our friend's eye. Awareness of our sin can help us to be humble. It can inspire us to forgive people who harm us. It can even help us to be easy on ourselves if we get too obsessed with what we do right or wrong versus how we can love more fully—including loving ourselves.

Remembering our mortality is a tricky thing—and potentially more profound if we can use that reality as a method for growth. Spiritual masters have written of the importance of staying aware of death. In St. Francis' famous Canticum of the Sun, he wrote of "Sister Death." Though many may fear it, there is power in remembering death throughout our lives.

In my work as a chaplain in seminary and in these ten years since my ordination, I have been with many people who are very ill and approaching death. There is no one way that people and their loved ones respond. But one recurrent theme is kindness. People do things to make the person comfortable. They tell funny stories. They sing favorite songs. They tell the person how important they are to them. At times they speak a needed truth. They forgive. They pray together. There are periods of silence. It is holy time.

Here is the thing—in those cases the people know their loved one is dying. What we ignore in our daily lives is the truth that we are all dying. Ash Wednesday reminds us of this as we have ashes put on our foreheads and hear the words, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Whether the ashes are placed on a precious baby, a beloved elder, or anyone in between, the truth is the same.

So what if we treat each other the way we treat those we know are dying? Focus on kindness. Thank people who bless us—and learn to appreciate even those people that are difficult for us to love. Keep silent when we do not know what to say. Speak truth when needed. Forgive. Pray for people. Sing and have fun together. Move through life with a deep appreciation that it is not forever—for us or for the people around us. That gives our approach to life a certain tenderness and humility that would be a good practice for Lent.

And do all this with a deep, abiding faith in God's love for us. "God, you hate nothing you have made." The forgiveness and kindness we offer to others comes first from God's great love for us. It is like a well of living water within our hearts that we can access during this season of Lent. If we get this clear—that God loves us and is *for* us—then we have what we need by faith to live that way for others.

So as we begin Lent this year, whatever practice we may take on or whatever habit we may give up, let us always remember the deeper issues of life and why we do these things. If we do, then keeping a holy Lent makes sense and can help us grow closer to God and to one another as we pursue God's purpose on earth.

Henri-Frederic Amiel wrote it this way:

"Oh, do not let us wait to be just or pitiful or demonstrative toward those we love until they or we are struck down by illness or threatened with death!

Life is short and we have never too much time for gladdening the hearts of those who are traveling the dark journey with us.

Oh, be swift to love, make haste to be kind!"

Amen.