

Ash Wednesday 2017

2 Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Earth to earth; ashes to ashes; dust to dust.

You know these words – the words intoned as a casket is set over the open grave, awaiting its final resting place. The words I intoned as I symbolically poured sand in the shape of the cross on my sister's casket almost two weeks ago now. Not my sister, really, but how do I name the relationship with this woman who shared my girlhood as friend, shared her room with me as her brother's fiancé, shared life with me as we raised our children – cousin's all – as sisters in law, and continued to share history and friendship with me as "ex"-relatives? Her name was Cindy, and "sister" is the best way to name our relationship. She was 60 years old, and finally claimed by the MS that gradually depleted her body of its ability to function.

Earth to earth; ashes to ashes; dust to dust.

In just a few moments each one of us will hear the comparable words, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return," as ashes are smudged on your forehead in the shape of a cross. Once a year, whether we need it or not, we pause to be reminded of our human mortality, to reorient ourselves to right relationship with God, with creation, and with one another. At moments of birth and death, what is essential becomes crystal clear, and everything else melts away. Life itself is a gift that comes to us without either our permission or our request, and departs from us most often in the very same way.

The season of Lent that we begin tonight is an invitation to reflect on the fleeting nature of life and to take stock of how we want to use this precious life while we are still able to choose.

Somber, mortal, and grim, I suspect that most of us don't receive this invitation to self-reflection and anticipation of our inevitable demise with enthusiasm and delight. But what if this Lenten season truly is an invitation and opportunity to be set free – to be liberated from all of the cares and anxieties and fears that so paralyze us all the days that we just “go through the motions?”

You see, everyone becomes a saint when they die! I've seen it happen again and again, at every funeral I've ever witnessed. When a life has ended, no one is holding on to the mistakes that were made in life; no one is remembering the faults and failings of the loved one who has died. The screw ups and selfishness and unkind words are not the stuff of eulogies and funeral sermons. What remains is whatever glimpse of love or generosity of spirit or goodwill that ever graced the life of the deceased.

What if you knew, right now, today, that your legacy, when life departs from you, will be that of Beloved Child of God – and not all the stuff that brings you shame and regret and embarrassment? What freedom would that bring to every day if you lived into that truth? Paul writes to the church at Corinth “We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. *Now is the acceptable time! Now is the day of salvation!*”

What if Lent is about being set free from our obsessive focus on ourselves and our accomplishments (or lack thereof) and instead opening us up to our very real connection and belonging to God,

to creation, and to our neighbor? “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Everything in between is gift.

For generations the repentance and disciplines of Lent have been seen as a time to go deeper into self-reflection and regret. To ponder how bad we have been and how far short we have fallen from God’s desires and expectations. The very word “repent” has taken on implications of feeling sorry for who we are and (in the language of our confession) “what we have done and what we have left undone.” Seeing ourselves honestly, sins and all, is an essential aspect of drawing near to God. But if we linger there, we miss the point. We settle for bondage rather than the freedom that is ours in Christ. There is one reason and one reason only, for acknowledging our shortcomings: to turn us back to our God-given identity as precious, spirit-breathed, beloved creatures, made by God for the sake of the world.

If we look at the disciplines of Lent from this perspective, maybe this somber season can itself be transformed. Prayer, fasting, and gifts of mercy are the marks of a faithful life. Jesus doesn’t question that his disciples will undertake these practices. But he does poke fun at our motivations for doing them.

Yes, I did say Jesus pokes fun at us.

What we hear in Matthew’s gospel as an exhortation to serious discipline and a heavy weight of obligation is actually Jesus’ caricature of religious practice. No one actually sounded horns to draw attention to their generous giving – not even the self-righteous Pharisees. But we are all aware of philanthropy that is intended to benefit the *giver* (in terms of approval and honor and esteem in the community) rather than for the benefit of the one in

need. By contrast Jesus invites us to let go of the implications of our giving for *ourselves* and be free to give generously that our neighbors will benefit.

So with prayer. While beautiful phrases and colorful language is enticing and enchanting to listen to, it too easily shifts the focus on the one praying, and not on God, the intended conversation partner. More and bigger words do not turn God's head. Flowery language is for our own sake, while prayer itself is for the sake of relationship with God and neighbor. Jesus would likely agree with Anne Lamont about the three essential prayers: "Help me." "Thank you." And "Wow." Enough said.

And perhaps fasting is the most confusing of all. I often wonder what it is *for*. Jesus calls out those who draw attention to themselves by looking gaunt or acting faint from their efforts at self-deprivation. They've received the attention they desire. But if no one knows you are practicing self-discipline...why do it at all? Do people still even ask the question, "What are you giving up for Lent?"

Yet Jesus assumes that disciples will fast.

- To remind themselves of the abundance of God's good provision that is too often taken for granted.
- To orient toward the "*Who*" of creation rather than the "*What*" of possessions.
- To acknowledge and share in the experience of those whose place in society forces them to do without through no choice of their own.
- To gain clarity about the difference between needs and wants.
- To inspire generosity.

The disciplines of Lent are actually glimpses of Good News breaking into the Broken Places in our lives and in our world.

In a world of “selfies” and self-promotion, where “me” and “mine” consume our time, our energy and our resources, where concern for individual safety trumps the wellbeing of the neighbor...Jesus invites us into another realm – the realm of community, and generosity, and extravagant, risky, abundant life.

The end is sure: Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.

In this season of Lent we take time to focus on that which is essential. We are liberated from our self-obsession and turned again toward the God who is Source and Goal of life. Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. And in the meantime, boldly embrace the gift of life that is yours. Scatter your fragments lavishly and experience the grace of God.

Amen.