

Ash Wednesday
February 9, 2005

Isaiah 58:1-12

2 Corinthians 5: 20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Can I ask a favor of you this morning? For just a few moments can you tolerate my being a grumpy old man? I'm feeling a little grumpy this morning because I don't like Ash Wednesday. In fact, it's probably my least favorite festival of the church year. In the religious circles where I grew up Ash Wednesday ushered in what promised to be six dismal weeks of scolding and self-humiliation. It carried the promise of six wretched weeks sitting in the corner, rehearsing what a loathsome piece of crud we were. This never much appealed to me.

The prayer of the day in our hymnal that we used to say on Ash Wednesday went like this:

Almighty and everlasting God, who hatest nothing that Thou hast made and dost forgive the sins of all those who are penitent, create and make in us new and contrite hearts that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of Thee, the God of mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness.

When I prayed that prayer I don't think I ever took to heart the part about God not hating anything God had made, because that assurance was so hopelessly qualified and compromised by what followed: that God would forgive only those who were penitent, that we needed contrite hearts, that we needed to be people who not only lamented our sins and acknowledged our wretchedness, but did so "worthily." So in my construction of this prayer, if I could hate myself enough, then maybe, in fact, God would not hate me. And I had all six weeks of Lent to work on proving just how much I despised my wretchedness.

And then there were the ashes. Oh, yes, the ashes! Ashes to wear on our foreheads - thankfully we at least had given up on the sackcloth - but there were still the ashes, smudged on our oily brows to rub in not only how despicably inadequate and offensive we are, but also how tenuous our hold on life is, how short our allotted time, how brief the respite till the grim reaper arrives to spirit us off to our Maker: "Dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return." Back in the days when I - like some of you today - was bright and shiny and in the prime of life, did they really need to sully the joy of our youth by warning us that one day all this would be taken away? Nowadays I only need to look at myself in the mirror, as I do each morning, when I'm forced to observe the ravages of time up close. At 65 years old, I don't know that I really need any further reminders of my mortality.

My childhood wasn't even all that bad, and yet you can see how I still carry those old tapes in me from my childhood so many eons ago. It's hard to erase them. It's hard to let them go, even though I know that we at PLTS don't think about Ash Wednesday in quite the dreary and oppressive way that I've been describing.

Here at PLTS, after all, we read the biblical texts prescribed by the liturgical calendar, and the festival is informed by the texts. And the texts for today - God's Word for today - seem to me to

portray a distaste for the sort of punitive Ash Wednesday I've been describing that's at least as intense as my own.

What about the epistle for the day? Here we have Paul, boasting--as he often does--about all he's been through and how well he has weathered it all. "As servants of God, we have commended ourselves in every way." We conduct ourselves so that "no fault may be found with our ministry." Paul says "we" and "our," but as often in his letters he really means himself. He has commended himself in every way. He has conducted his ministry so no one can find any fault with it. This does not sound like the pleading of a penitent. Some scholars have said Paul displays a remarkably "robust conscience." Even when he says "wretched man that I am" in Romans 7, it's more rhetoric than true confessions. What a text for Ash Wednesday! Were the designers of the common lectionary suggesting that Ash Wednesday and Lent should NOT be a time of breast-beating and self-recrimination? If Paul is our model, he thinks he's been doing pretty well. His challenge for Lent? -- "Be reconciled to God. . . . Don't accept the grace of God in vain." If you want to do something special during Lent, how about spending time and energy trying to figure out what are the obstacles to God's grace entering your life? God reaches out to us with love, compassion, affection, support. Why are we pulled to hold on to an angry God, a vindictive God, a violent and resentful God, instead of embracing the God of Jesus, the God of generosity and grace? Lent is an invitation to let God hug us, hold us, and grace our lives with joy and peace -- "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything."

What about Jesus in the Gospel today?

[W]hen you do your charitable giving, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. [W]henever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. . . . But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face. And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues . . . so that they may be seen by others. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door

Jesus pillories public parades of pretentious piety in favor of anonymous acts of benevolence and personal devotion out of public view. What a text for Ash Wednesday at a theological seminary! Were the designers of the common lectionary warning all the members of seminary communities to beware of the public display of piety and devotion to which this day invites us?

If you think about it, Ash Wednesday is a dangerous day for those of us in a seminary. We are, after all, a training camp for the publicly religious. Whether we are in the business of becoming priests or theologians or public servants of whatever sort, we are engaged here in the public practice of our piety. In fact, we train here to stand up before the multitudes and pray, even to dazzle them with the richness, devotion, sincerity, and fluency of our petitions. We stand here around the altar in our long robes, and our sober demeanor, flowing phrases, and pious tones reassure the faithful around us of just how religious the ideal Christian will become after years at a seminary of the church. We train here to stand up before learners and expound upon the divine mysteries. We train here to offer help and service to others publicly, officially, in the name of the Church, in

the name of Christ. “Beware of practicing your piety before others?” That’s what we get paid for!! And it’s hazardous.

This day and all of Lent can so easily become for us a proving ground for our piety. It can slide into becoming an exam for us to pass. “And what are the spiritual disciplines you practice to sustain your life with God,” a candidacy committee may ask, and we think, “Gee, if I don’t have some outstanding spiritual devotion going in Lent, then what sort of a bogus Christian am I? Starting today at least, I had better be prepared to prove to the candidacy committee and to my classmates or colleagues just how spiritual and disciplined I am.” Lent can be hazardous for those of us in a seminary.

What about the text from Isaiah appointed for today?

Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? No, this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke. It’s to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin.

What a text for Ash Wednesday! What a wonderful mandate for Lent!!

Isaiah, like other OT prophets, repudiates ritual acts of self-abnegation in favor of social/political/economic acts of generosity and mutual care. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then--says Isaiah--your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.

The repentance called for by Ash Wednesday and Lent--this metánoia (I like to translate it as “attitude adjustment”)--is not a remorseful wallowing in guilt and shame. It is a redirection of our hearts and lives away from self toward the neighbor. Of course, that also means redirection away from worry and concern for ourselves and our security and status before others and before God so that we are free to embrace our neighbor--with all the annoyances, shortcomings, needs and demands that come with the neighborhood.

So in order to tolerate the imposition of ashes today, I have come up with my own understanding of what it means to have ashes affixed to my brow. I am going to think of ashes as a form of dirt or soil or earth. I am going to think of how we have come, like Adam, like Eve, from the earth, and like Adam and Eve we will all one day return to the earth from whence we came. That means we are earthlings, creatures of the earth like the other animals, even like the redwood trees, the blooming flowers and grasses that grace this hill, and--shall I say the creatures of bread and wine that we will soon be sharing together. We are intrinsic components of this ecosystem that is our planet. We are not angels or divinities, and it is good for us not to pretend to be divinities or anything else more than the mortal earthlings that we are.

Over the door or the ancient Temple of Apollo at Delphi was the famous phrase “Know thyself!” It meant know who you are, that you are a human and not a god. Know your place in the cosmic ecosystem, and then you will know what is expected of you and what is not. You will be in har-

mony with the universe and all will be well with you. “Know yourself” is not a bad motto to guide us through Lent.

The other side of being earthlings is our kinship with other creatures of the earth, kinship with our neighbors on this planet. And I think we can understand this text from the prophet Isaiah to be inviting us not to focus on ourselves today and during all of Lent, but to use this season to explore our vital place within this ecosystem of earthlings, to plumb the limits of our capacity to live our lives connected to and in care for these others who, like us, have come from the soil of the earth and will return there. That means, I think, not becoming more private during Lent, but becoming more public, not parading our personal piety, but finding our appropriate public voice, if we are to do anything meaningful to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke, even if we are to share our bread with the hungry or bring the homeless poor into our house, or to cover the naked. We find our public voice and our public role exactly so that we will not hide ourselves from our kin across the face of this planet that is our common home.

The word “Lent” means spring. Lent is springtime. It’s the season of fresh growth and new life. The daffodils have been blooming in our yard at home, and the other day I noticed the violets have come out too. The days are lengthening. The sun is warming the soil. It’s become time once again to get fingers down into the earth. Soon we’ll be able to lie down on the grass or the sand or a warm slab of rock. The ashes of Ash Wednesday are a down payment on our converse with the earth and our fellow earthlings and a badge of our opportunity to embed our selves in service to our sisters and brothers on this earth. Isaiah suggests that, when we so grasp God’s generosity and live it out in generous care for the others, all will be well:

The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Lent is more like a feast than a fast, not a season to hate one’s failures but a time to feel and know and live out of God’s inexhaustible love for us and every earthborn creature. If that’s what Lent is about, I feel less grumpy today and less old.