

ASH WEDNESDAY

by Rev. Gail Williford
February 17, 2010

7 p.m. Service of Ashes



ST. PAUL'S

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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Lectionary Texts: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51:1-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; and Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

'Beware of practising your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

²So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.openly'

⁵And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.openly'

¹⁶And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.openly'

¹⁹ 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

In all likelihood, when you leave St. Paul's tonight you will have imprinted upon your forehead the sign of the cross. You will bear on your body a smudge of black ashes, which tells the world that you are a follower of Christ. The dark mark also indicates that you, like all human beings, will die.

Today Christians all over the world begin the church season of Lent. This particular day, Ash Wednesday, is a somber occasion which initiates a sobering 40-day period, roughly the tithe of the year, devoted to an introspective glimpse of life, our relationships with God, one another, ourselves, and our mortality. To some people this season can seem macabre, a downer, inappropriate in the Christian calendar. But anyone who has lived knows that life is not solely a series of exciting, positive, celebrative, perfect moments. Life is not just Christmas and Easter. Our world and our existence also are replete with pain, setbacks, worry, mistakes, and death. But as Christians we have the assurance that God is present to us in all of life – the good and the bad, the successes and the failures, the joy and the sorrows, life and death. We are called to be faithful – to say yes to all of life – to live authentically with the positive and the negative. What we are given is this moment, this now. May we embrace *now* with our whole heart.

We all are on a journey, a pilgrimage, from childhood through adolescence to successive levels of maturity as adults. Some of that journey is joyous; some is dauntingly painful. As Father Laurence Freeman notes, “in the great religions the long journey into the harsh realities of life is recognized and accepted. It is not airbrushed away.... The spiritual awakening, and the turning point of any life, is to understand that the journey into the wilderness is also a return ... (in which) we integrate and process all that has happened to us.”

For just as Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days facing temptation, hunger, thirst, and other difficulties, we pass through Lent’s wilderness reflecting upon the temptations we encounter; the hunger and thirst which haunt us; the difficulties with which we must live.

If you are like me, you do not want to struggle with hard times. We all want life to be smooth sailing, joyous, pleasant. But life is not that way. Sometimes we are ill or receive troubling diagnoses. Sometimes we fail in relationships. Sometimes people we love hit rough patches. Sometimes we experience grievous loss. Sometimes we falter. Sometimes we are sad or upset, lost, confused, broken. Sometimes we are ashamed or guilt-ridden for things we have done or things we failed to do. Lent is a

season of the year which is most in touch with the phase of the reality of life we call darkness, the *via negativa*. After all, Jesus, our brother, our exemplar, experienced trials, failure, abandonment, and death – just as we do.

Jesus showed us the way to endure life's hardships – he revealed to us the path for our Lenten experience. Jesus embraced *all* that life presented. He shied away from nothing. We are called to do the same. Listen to this prayer, called the Welcome Prayer from the Contemplative Outreach organization, which tracks and exemplifies Jesus's acceptance of all of life.

Welcome. Welcome. Welcome.

I welcome everything that comes to me at this moment because I know it is for my healing.

I welcome all thoughts, feelings, emotions, conditions, situations.

I let go of my desire for safety and security.

I let go of my desire for esteem and approval.

I let go of my desire for power and control.

I let go of my desire to change any thought, feeling, emotion, condition, situation or person, including myself.

I open myself to the healing presence and action of God – of the Spirit within.

Welcome!

This welcoming of everything, of absolutely all that has occurred, was a hallmark of Jesus. With God's help, it can and we pray *will* be our way, too.

We can approach this openness and welcome of all things because we have the gift of God's grace accompanying us throughout our lives. We are held in the heart of God and carry deep within us a spark of the divine. As psychotherapist and author James Finley notes, we are precious in God's sight; God is *smitten* with us. As Dr. Jim Moore of St. Luke's used to say, "if God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it." Can you imagine yourself as deeply loved as this? And if God's love

is this expansive and encompassing, what could possibly be more important? What could worry you? What could cause you sleepless nights or agonized days? Why would you seek power or control, approval or esteem from any other source? Why would you want to change what is for something less?

God grants us grace, the unmerited gift of love. We can experience grace all throughout our lives. Author Marilyn McEntyre calls us to recognize in our ordinary lives “the second chances, the surprises, the epiphanies and undeserved gifts, the goodness that arises from the ash heap of failure, the joy that comes in the wake of loss, the time when God breaks through the logic of circumstance and ambushes us with love and new opportunities.” As our communion liturgy states “all this is God’s gift offered to us without price.”

We are part of this equation, too. We are called to love, not a sentimental Hallmark card kind of love, but a love that stems from God. I remember remarking to a mentor of mine once that I found the call to speak the truth in love to be difficult. I felt that I was more loving than truthful. Quickly he came back to me, saying “what if they couldn’t be separated?” What if you need to be truthful to be deeply, faithfully loving? God asks us to love honestly, with compassion, asking for and receiving forgiveness, when it’s easy and when it’s hard. We need a love that has sinews and muscle, love which wrestles with the difficult, which celebrates achievements of another, which gives even when there is no hope of return. To understand this divine love, we need only turn to the example of Jesus, who came to show us and became literally be the way, the truth, and the life. Jesus’ life symbolizes that love is not a feeling; it is a decision.

The love we are to show, which we are instructed to reveal, stems from the two Great Commandments: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. (And) You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” We love because God first loved us. We are called to love even the most objectionable people, those whom Mother Teresa described by noting: “there goes Jesus in one of his distressing disguises.” We are called to love even in the most dire of circumstances.

Etty Hillesum is not a name familiar to many of us. Born in January of 1914 in the Netherlands where she lived until her death in November 1943 in Auschwitz, Etty was a Jew and a true mystic. In the last two years of her abbreviated life, she kept a diary in which she described her evolution into a deep, abiding, powerful, transformative relationship with God. A brilliant thinker and student of Jung, Rilke, and Dostoevsky, Etty began to search for the divine, not by thought, but by love. How a Jewish woman in the middle of the Holocaust found love, peace, and freedom is an astounding story of the redemptive power of God's presence and love. Recounting an early revelation, she wrote: "Inside me there is a deep well. In it God sits." In response to the widespread suffering that surrounded and engulfed her, she noted: "By suffering I learn. I learn to accept that we have to share our love with the whole of creation, with the entire cosmos. But this love also gives us access to the cosmos within ourselves.... Only after every individual has found peace in himself, only after he has rooted out and has conquered all hatred against his fellow men of whatever race or nationality and has transformed it into something... like love, only then can peace become real." Shortly before her death in the gas chambers, she mused, "sometimes I am filled with an infinite tenderness....Happen what may, it's bound to be for the good."

We are not all called to be martyrs or mystics like Etty Hillesum, but we are called to love. We are called to be honest, to be authentic, to be compassionate in the midst of whatever is. We have God's love to fill us, transform us, accompany us on our journey of faith all the way through joy, suffering, promise, pain, and even death. Remind us, Lord, of your abiding presence – this Lent and always. Thanks be to God. Amen.