

Sermon: Ash Wednesday

The Rev. Mike Wernick

February 10, 2016

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Joel 2:1-2,12-17

Psalm 103:8-14

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

My Lord... my sins... are like the highest mountain... my good deeds... are very few... they're like a small pebble... I turn to you... my heart full of shame... my eyes full of tears... bestow your forgiveness and mercy upon me... send your peace and blessings... these words are lyrics... from a sung prayer called Supplication...

So when we think of sin... a mountain of sin... just what do we think about... whose definition are we using... do we remember St. Augustine's doctrine of original sin... Augustine... whose own sexual impulses were a source of intense emotional pain for him... St. Augustine... whose concubine who bore him a son... do we focus on sexual sin...

When we think about sin... do we think about it in terms of our worthiness... as in the line from what Episcopalians know as the Prayer of Humble Access... *we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table... but thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy*... a possible reference to the conversation Jesus had with the Syrophenician woman who wanted him to heal her daughter... and who challenged his coming for all people... and Jesus said yes... you are worthy...

When we think about sin... do we think about the Fukushima Nuclear Reactor leaking radioactive waste into the Pacific Ocean... and God's charge that we care for the Earth... or how we accept weather predictions from a groundhog in Pennsylvania... but deny evidence of climate change from scientists...

When we think of sin... do we remember that the Greek word *hamartia*... simply means *missing the mark*... and so we have to ask... do we miss the mark because God

irresistibly wills it... or do we miss the mark because we use the free will we have been given... consciously or maybe unconsciously... to miss it... and if we can choose to miss it then we can certainly choose to hit it...

But sometimes it's not the things we do... but the way we do them... that misses the mark... our Gospel reminds us to beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them... says whenever you give alms do not sound a trumpet before you... whenever you pray do not stand at the street corners... whenever you fast do not look dismal... in other words... don't draw attention to yourself...

And there are times when I don't draw attention... when I can be comfortably silent... and let the activity or conversation just go on around me... but there are times I do draw attention to myself... I drop a name when someone else does... because I want to feel important or impress someone... there are times I share what I did... not because anyone asked but because I want to gain some social capital... even though what happened happened years ago and may even not be relevant to the conversation... and there are times when I share what I know because I want to appear competent or intelligent... sometimes I feel like Peter on the mountaintop... talking without knowing what I'm saying...

John Shea wrote: today's teaching comes in the context of the entire Sermon on the Mount... and the instruction to "go to your room and shut the door... is an instruction to turn one's attention inward... to go to a place that's not accessible to others... but only to God... where only God can see... and one place where only God can see is the human heart...

I think there's a connection between missing the mark... and the human heart... and when we think about what we do... I think it's critical that we're also mindful of why we do what we do... our motivation matters... and the feeling we have... when we realize

we're not doing what the heart would have us do... is the feeling of denied connection... so I too am learning to be more vulnerable and mindful of why I do what I do...

Shea adds... acts of religious piety need to be done with the proper inner attitude or they don't achieve their primary purpose... which is union with our always present God... being fed so we can offer that life and love to others... but we can confuse conditional positive regard from others... with unconditional love from God... we may feel it more easily when it comes from other people... and draw social acknowledgment towards ourselves to get more of it... but then... we're looking in the wrong direction...

We accept that there's nowhere we can go where God is not... but feeling God's presence... means that we need be vulnerable... replacing the regard of the world with the love of God... and we need to be vulnerable enough to ask whether we take the few times we hit the mark and turn them into mountain... or whether we take the many times we miss the mark and turn them into pebbles...

Remembering that we're dust... isn't a value judgment on our self worth... remembering that we're created from the same dust... connects us... and because the same Spirit has breathed life into us... we're all connected in Spirit too... and when we increasingly realize that what affects one of us affects all of us... then we need to set aside what family asks of us... what culture and society and politics ask of us... and be mindful of what God asks of us... and decide how we want to fill our time... with things that benefit only ourselves... or with things that benefit our neighbors and the planet...

Let these forty days of Lent then... be for us... a time of inner reflection and mindfulness... and an exercise to discern not only what we do... but why we do it... what our deeper motivations are... and ask whether we seek the glory of the world... or the Glory of God...

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