

Sermon: Ash Wednesday

The Rev. Mike Wernick

February 14, 2018

Year B

Joel 2:1-2,12-17

Psalm 103:8-14

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

I don't like to talk about death... I don't dislike it... but I don't like... talking... about it... I'm aware... when I remember some of the shootings over the past year or so... I'm uncomfortably aware... that as a gay man... as a gay priest... my life may be at increased risk... our inclusive theology may make us a target for someone whose idea of god... is a vengeful god... so I want to preach about happy things... but if that's all I do... I'm failing in my ministry... and doing you a dis-service...

Because while they say that there are two things we can't avoid... and you know what those are... what's even truer than that... what we really can't avoid... are death... and being fallible... death and sin... death and missing the mark... missing the bullseye that God has set for us... try as we might to hit that target dead center every time... we just can't do it... and while there was some talk... in Genesis 3:22... about eating from the Tree of Life and living forever... we don't... and so Ash Wednesday is about our deaths...

On Sunday... we heard about a mountaintop experience... about Transfiguration... about clothing that was whiter than anyone could bleach it... and about a voice... the first time... at Jesus' baptism... it said... *You are my Son... the Beloved... with you I am well pleased*... and only Jesus heard it... this time... it said... *This is my Son... the Beloved... listen to him*... and Peter... James... and John heard it too... the purpose of Jesus' preaching and healing was becoming clearer... and when they descended into the valley... Jesus told them to say nothing...

Today... we begin to accompany Jesus on his Lenten journey... as he is criticized... condemned... judged... and killed... and we begin our own forty day journey of

Tenebrae... down into our own valleys of increasing darkness... of reflecting on our brokenness... of being brave enough... maybe in a voice that only we hear... to speak truth to ourselves... a journey in which we embrace our humility... and face our flaws... and the ways in which we may be lazy... angry... gluttonous... envious... addicted... lustful... prideful... greedy... or wasteful...

But Ash Wednesday... is not just about our physical deaths... it's also about dying to an identity that comes only from our earthly parents... and embracing our identities as children of God... Ash Wednesday is about dying to our small selves... and being reborn as children of God... Ash Wednesday is about dying to our egos... so we can move from the small "me"... and from selfish concerns and myopic desires... to the boundless "Me"... and to selfless concerns and universal desires...

On my first Ash Wednesday with you... six years ago... I claimed that singer Joni Mitchell was right... when she wrote in the song Woodstock... that we are literally made up of stardust... so we can understand why some clergy have begun to impose ashes with the more lyrical words... *Remember that you are stardust... and to the stars you shall return...* I will not... however... use those words today / this evening...

But today is also Valentine's Day... for some... that might seem to dampen the celebration... but I think it just enhances it... you see... the more typical things that people give or receive today... cards... and chocolate... and flowers... are things have been heavily marketed to us... and I think I even saw a commercial for diamonds... or some Canyonero-type SUV... just in case you weren't sure how to tell someone that you love them...

And the Church recognizes at least three different saints named Valentine or Valentinus... all of whom were martyred... one legend says that Valentine was a priest who served during the third century in Rome... when Emperor Claudius II decided that single men made better soldiers than those with wives and families... and he outlawed

marriage for these young men... Valentine... realizing the injustice of the decree... defied Claudius and continued to perform marriages for young lovers in secret... and when his actions were discovered... Claudius ordered that he be put to death...

Other stories suggest that Valentine may have been killed for attempting to help Christians escape harsh Roman prisons... where they were often beaten and tortured... according to one legend... an imprisoned Valentine actually sent the first "valentine" greeting himself after he fell in love with a young girl... possibly his jailor's daughter... who visited him during his confinement...

Before his death... it is said that he wrote her a letter signed "From your Valentine"... and although the truth behind the Valentine legends is murky... the stories all emphasize his appeal as a sympathetic... heroic... and most importantly... romantic figure...

And while some believe that Valentine's Day is celebrated in the middle of February to commemorate the anniversary of this saint's death or burial... which probably occurred around 270 AD... others claim that the Christian church may have decided to place St. Valentine's feast day in the middle of February in an effort to "Christianize" the pagan celebration of Lupercalia... a fertility festival...

But in his book The Road Less Traveled... however... M. Scott Peck describes love... not as a romanticized Victorian sentiment... not as a feeling at all... but as a commitment to the spiritual... psychological... emotional... and physical growth and development of another human being... and while we talk about holding unconditional positive regard for others... while we talk about unconditional love... our myopic egos fear death so much... fear limitations so much... that we fool ourselves into thinking that there's not enough to go around... not enough resources... and certainly not enough love... and that unless we think of ourselves first... then no one will think of us at all... and our fallibilities and all that comes with them... raise up...

So why does Valentine's Day enhance our celebration of Ash Wednesday... we have to ask the question... how does God's love compare to human love... and I think Peck hit the center of the bull's eye on this one... it's because God loves us so much... that God is the only One who is deeply... eternally committed to our spiritual... psychological... emotional... and physical growth and development...

And so how would it be... if we expressed our love for others... the way God expresses God's love for us... with radical grace... and how would it be... if we forgave each other... the way God forgives us...

I recently heard a story that can help us imagine this process... at our apartment Friday is trash pick up day... we have to take the trash out of the house Thursday evening and put it in the trash can... and wheel the trash can out to the drive... and the next morning... a truck comes along and takes it away... the truck never brings it back... the driver never reminds us about the dirty... smelly... repugnant things we got rid of... and they never presume to come into our home and take it out against our will... we must identify and collect what we want to discard... the dirtiness of our lives that we no longer wish to keep... and offer it up to be removed... this is how God works... God already knows what we need to be forgiven for... God already knows what needs to be discarded... but God never takes it away from us until we're ready to let go of it... but as soon as we identify it... collect it... and bring it to the curb... God is ready to take it away and forget it...

When mortality touches our lives... we appreciate life so much more... we take fewer things... and people... for granted... we see things which may have escaped our sight... hear things which may have escaped our ears... and understand things which may have escaped our minds... how would it be then... if every day... we were marked with ashes... to remind us of our humanity... and our humility... and to remind us to count our blessings... to love generously... and speak kindly... and forgive quickly...

And you'll remember that three days ago... before Lent began... we heard about a brilliant flash of transfiguring light... Ash Wednesday may be a reminder of our sinfulness and our deaths... and Lent will end with the darkness of Good Friday... but that brilliant light can never be quenched...

So you see... Ash Wednesday is not only about sin and death... and it is certainly not about hopelessness... because we are sealed by the Holy Spirit... and marked as Christ's own... forever...