

Sermon: Ash Wednesday

The Rev. Mike Wernick

February 18, 2015

Year B

Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalm 103:8-14

2 Corinthians 5:20b--6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

The year my daughter Rachel turned nine... was the year the movie Titanic came out... the one with Leonardo and Kate... and she wanted to see it... some of her friends had... and of course they talked... and this just fueled her desire... but her mom and I had some reservations... we'd seen some of the trailers... and although they showed human hope... they also seemed full of tremendous human suffering... and it was this second piece that concerned us... at nine years old... we didn't think Rachel was old enough to see... hear... and feel many of these things... without being affected... we didn't think she was emotionally sophisticated enough to integrate... and to separate out... what she was seeing... real history... from make believe...

In fact... there's some research that's been done... that shows that parts of the brain can't tell the difference between what's real and what's make believe... apparently... if you see a terrible car accident on the highway... and one in a movie... the same areas of the brain respond pretty much the same way... as far as the brain is concerned... what's make believe is the same as what's real... there are... of course... for most of us... other parts of the brain that *help us* tell them apart... and help us determine what we believe and think... and how to act...

And what we believe and think... and how we act... is determined by our ability to tell the difference between what sin is... or isn't... and what treasure is... or isn't...

If we start off with the Ten Commandments... most of us would agree with what sin is... and if we start off with hypocrites standing on the street corners... it's pretty easy to tell what treasure is not...

But we usually face more than 200 choices... each day... how easy does it remain then... to tell the difference between what sin is... or what we tell ourselves it's not... and the difference between what treasure is... and what we tell ourselves it's not... and we're all very good at rationalizing almost anything to ourselves... and so we end up... maybe... sometimes... convincing ourselves that something real... is make believe... and doesn't matter... has no consequence...

If we're all members of the body of Christ... if as quantum physics says... everything is interconnected with everything else... and the decisions we make have a ripple effect down the line... then we want to be really careful... about what we believe and think... and how we act...

There are some easy examples... do we return the extra ten dollar bill the cashier mistakenly gives us... or believe it's just our good fortune... do we hurry into a parking space even when the car down the aisle already had it's turn signal on for it... others are not so easy... as a nation... are there things we do that contribute to human trafficking... do we take whatever action is needed so that train cars full of crude oil don't derail in W. Va. and foul the environment... do we engage in civil disobedience... and break the law... so we can support social justice... these too... tell us where our hearts and treasure are...

Pastor Nannette Sawyer wrote about a simple act... she said: I wonder if I can treasure washing the dishes... if I could... I would be amazed that the dishes can be used again and again and again... they are there... waiting for me to put eggs and toast on them for breakfast... and sandwiches and soup for lunch... when I washed the dishes... I would think about all the people who have eaten off those plates while sitting around the table with me... I would think about the laughter... right along with the moments when tears welled up in the corners of our eyes... as we told each other stories of real things happening in our lives... I would even be grateful for the awkward silences that have sometimes happened... when new friendships were trying to be forged...

If I could treasure washing the dishes... I would make more space for mundane things... like cooking and eating... I would sweep the floor like I loved it... as though I was caressing it... because on that floor I walk and have my life... if I could treasure washing the dishes... I would not store up treasures on earth... but I would store up treasures of the heart... treasures of love and honor and simple joy...

I have sometimes fallen into the sin of: *I told you so*... which is not loving... honorable... and joyful... when I've done this... I've told myself that I've done it for *their* benefit... so that maybe they will know better next time... will remember the mistake they've made... but I've ended up being like one of the hypocrites... who stands on the street corners so that I may be seen by others... even just this one person... and when I've behaved like this... I have my treasure right there and then... it's like instant karma... there is no waiting... whatever satisfaction I get from that *I told you so*... is all there's going to be... there's no treasure stored up in heaven as a result... and when I've done this... I've done nothing to invite relationship... like those Nannette develops at the dinner table... when I've done this... I'm not acknowledging the fullness of *my* broken humanity... I'm focusing on *their* broken humanity... logs and splinters...

The cross that's put on our foreheads today... reminds us of the cross that's put there at baptism... *You are sealed by the Holy Spirit... and marked as Christ's own forever*... the cross that's put on our foreheads today... reminds us to avoid sin and store up treasure... where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal... the cross that's put on our foreheads today... reminds us in a very real and NOT make believe way... that we share this dust with all that has ever been created... with the stars and the planets... and with every other human being who has ever lived... including Jesus...

And we share that dust when we share meals at table... or stories over that meal... we share that dust when we apologize for our *I told you so's*... and in that dust... we find the treasure of learning to love... that we are merely... only... wonderfully human... and

it reminds us that we can stop looking for our redemption in anyone or anything... and by turning our hearts and minds toward God... by repenting of our sin... know that we will find it there...

And the words of this hymn... this poem... this prayer... attributed to Irish poet Thomas Moore... remind us turn in that direction too:

Come, ye disconsolate, where'er ye languish;
Come to the mercy-seat, fervently kneel;
Here bring your wounded hearts, here tell your anguish,
Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal.

Joy of the comfortless, light of the straying,
Hope of the penitent, fadeless and pure;
Here speaks the Comforter, tenderly saying—
Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot cure.

Here see the Bread of Life; see waters flowing...
Forth from the throne of God, pure from above;
Come to the feast of love; come, ever knowing
Earth has no sorrow but heaven can remove.

I bid you... a Holy Lent...

Mike+