

# Sermon: Ash Wednesday

The Rev. Mike Wernick

March 6, 2019

Year C

Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalm 103:8-14

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

O God... my sins are like the highest mountain... my good deeds are very few... they're like small pebbles... it's true... isn't it... we don't always tell ourselves this truth... we sometimes minimize it... or deny it altogether... we sometimes try to convince ourselves that our good deeds are like the Rockies... and our sins are like the little bit of sand that gets in your shoe after walking on the beach... and it's not like we've all been convicted of various types of state or federal crimes and misdemeanors either... so what makes up those mountains of sin... it's all the small things we do... or don't do... or tell ourselves... or are in denial about... that add up... that accumulate over time... the sins to which we have become blind... or which we never saw... and it's the towering systems of injustice... which rise out of all those small things... which contribute to division and accusation... and which we allow to continue... by not doing enough to stop them... or by not even trying at all...

We can over-react... we can make mountains out of mole hills... we can judge ourselves too harshly... and minimize our gifts too completely... but because of pride... and because of how badly some people can behave... we put our best foot forward... we become experts at self-promotion... and remain novices at really knowing our selves... really... deeply... knowing our true selves...

Beware of practicing your piety before others so you can be seen by them... when you give alms... don't sound a trumpet before you... when you pray... don't be like the hypocrites... did you know... the word *hypocrite*... comes from the Greek word which means... *actor*... one who pretends... who wears a mask... those who hope to be seen as other than who and what they really are...

So don't draw attention to yourself... don't grandstand... scripture seems to be telling us... that when we don't tell anyone the good we've done... God knows the good we've done... and remembers... of course God remembers... but when we tell others... when we boast... when we seek the approval of others... and get it... then that's all we get... we've gotten our reward... when we work to improve our physical... psychological... and spiritual health... that's one reward... when I eat too many cookies... that's another kind of reward...

But there's a gray area... I think... where we want to be recognized for our achievements and accomplishments... because we know the journey we've made... where we were and where we are now... but really don't think we're better than anyone else... or where we think so little of ourselves... that we don't value what we've accomplished... and may not even feel deserving of God's love...

So when we do... what we know to be right... how often do we tell others about it... but more importantly... what are our motivations... how keenly are we aware of why we do what we do... do we do things for one reason... but tell ourselves it's for something entirely different...

There are some things I've done for years... telling myself I did them for thus-and-so reasons... but then I came to understand that I was really doing them for entirely different reasons... there is complex and complicated subtlety in the human heart and mind... and being in touch with... and honest about... why we do... what we do... requires almost heroic self-knowledge and differentiation... that's why I have said that we can't fully embody our Gospel lives... without also coming to terms with our family of origin dysfunction...

There's an Australian TV series that Joel and I have been watching... it's kind of a cross between Downton Abby and Bonanza... about a gentrified... well-to-do... sheep herding

family... and the secrets they keep... and the seemingly unforgivable consequences... that those secrets create...

Amidst a sea of Anglicans... one of the main characters... Sarah... is Jewish... a convert to Judaism... in order to share her husband's faith... and in her practice of Yom Kippur... the Day of At-one-ment... she doesn't simply ask God to forgive her sins... she makes herself vulnerable... and goes to all those she believes she has wronged... and names the wrong she believes she has committed against them... and asks them to forgive her... she seeks reconciliation... whether those people are a part of her community... whether they once were but are not now... or whether they never were... she seeks forgiveness... because she knows that there can be no unity within community... there can be no reconciliation with God... who forgives us always... unless we have at least tried to reconcile with those... who forgive us sometimes...

Here's a list of some of those things... for which... on Yom Kippur... the Jewish people ask forgiveness... and which it would be good for all of us... to ask for the same kinds of forgiveness from each other... they are the sins we commit under duress or willingly... from hardness of heart... those committed inadvertently... or with an utterance of the lips... sins committed in immorality... those done openly before God or secretly... either with knowledge and with deceit... or not... sins committed through speech... or by deceiving a fellow human being... those made by improper thoughts... or by a gathering of lewdness... sins committed though insincere verbal confession... by disrespect for parents and teachers... or by using coercion... sins committed by desecrating the Divine Name... by impurity of speech... or foolish talk... sins committed with evil inclination... sins we have committed knowingly or unknowingly... by false denial and lying... by bribe taking or bribe giving... those we have committed by scoffing... or by evil talk about one another... sins we have committed in business dealings... or by eating and drinking... by giving or taking interest... and by usury... sins we have committed by a haughty demeanor... or through the prattle of our lips... by the glance of the eye... and with proud looks or impudence... or through passing judgement... sins

we have committed by scheming against our fellow human beings... by offering a begrudging eye... or in frivolity... or by being stubborn... sins we have committed by running to do evil... by tale-bearing... by swearing in vain... or by causeless hatred... sins we have committed by embezzlement... by a confused heart... for minimizing God's blessings... even when we don't know that's what we're doing...

The light of the Incarnation at Christmas... and the light of Epiphany in January... and the light of last Sunday's Transfiguration... all illumine our darkness... and help us see where we veer off God's path for us... help us see our sin... and the light of Easter will come... but many times... the small part of our heart... that is disconnected from God's light... that operates in darkness... justifies our reasoning for doing what we do... in fact... it may be... that our ability to rationalize anything we do... is the greatest sin we commit... because then we can always convince ourselves... that the ends justify the means... and instead of seeking God's direction... we rationalize why God... should follow ours...

The only thing Jesus did... was follow God's direction... even when it was at odds with social convention... and in the Eucharist... we break other conventions... we eat Jesus' body... and drink his blood... during Jesus' time... contact with blood would mean ritual impurity... but Jesus turns things upside down... and many mystics have recognized that by inviting us to drink wine as his blood... Jesus is calling us to live in bodily solidarity... with every person whose blood has been unjustly shed on this earth... from the blood of Abel... the first murder in the Hebrew Bible... to the blood of Zechariah... the last...

In the act of drinking the blood of Christ... in this Holy Meal... we are consciously uniting with all unjust suffering in the world... from the beginning of time till its end... but we are also consuming its redemption...

Walter Brueggemann writes... Lent is a time to quit running... to let ourselves be caught and embraced in love... like a sheep with safe pasture... like a traveler offered rich and unexpected food... our life is not willed by God to be an endless anxiety... it is... rather... meant to be an embrace... but that means we must allow God to catch us... and when God does... God will breathe the breath of forgiveness on us... and when we remove our masks of hypocrisy... we will know what it is... to be loved for nothing more... than being who we are...

Mike+