

Ash Wednesday - February 26, 2020

[RCL]: Joel 2:1-2,12-17; Psalm 103:8-14; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

Wearing our Mortality

By Josette Keelor

When I told my husband I was giving the homily today, he said I should talk about hypocrisy. It's one of the things that's always stood out to him about Ash Wednesday, how we read from the Gospel about how we shouldn't shout our faith from the rooftops like the hypocrites would do, but how we then leave church with black ashen crosses on our foreheads.

It brings to mind a sarcastic response people sometimes make when they hear an embarrassing fact spoken about them in public:

"I'll have it tattooed on my forehead, OK?" they might say.

Today, on Ash Wednesday, we'll leave church with symbols of our faith written on our foreheads — crosses of ash to remind us that we come from dust and to dust we will return. But what does that really mean?

The Rev. Judith Jones addresses this seeming paradox in a commentary, saying that today's Gospel reading strikes many as an ironic choice for Ash Wednesday.

Professor Matt Skinner also points to people's confusion over the passage:

Too bad no one observed Ash Wednesday during the first century, he says. Jesus could have had a ball with it, given his penchant for directing special criticism toward religious people and their overt expressions of piety.

Both writers, however, point out a specific line in Matthew's text: Beware of doing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them.

This, they point out, is the key to understanding this passage. Jesus is not cautioning us to avoid praying in public or leading others in expressions of devotion to God. What he's doing is cautioning against using a pretense of righteousness for personal gain.

It isn't the wearing of ashes that is problematic -- it's our purpose in wearing them that matters.

To remember that we came from dust and to dust we will return has a way of sparking us to humility -- to remind us not to think too much of ourselves because after all, none of us will escape eventual death. We all have limited time on Earth, no matter how great our careers, how famous we might become, or how much money we might make. We all came from the same dust and we'll all return to the same dust. We all are equal.

So, yes, humility is a great lesson to learn from the ashes we bear on the first day of Lent. But I think when God tells us that from dust we come and to dust we return, He means for us to learn

a second lesson: That we are not meant to have ultimate control over our lives. Ultimate control is for God and God alone; and that should be a comforting thought.

God is here to do the worrying for us, and the ashes are to remind us that by being marked by God, we can trust that He has our backs.

Speaking on mortality, the Rev. Michael K. Marsh observes that *we live in a tension between the uncertainty of life and the certainty of death. And we work pretty hard at denying, ignoring, forgetting, outrunning, and overcoming those twin realities. But they are always there. They are always present to us in the same way the ashes with which we will be marked were already a part of and present in the palms we carried last year on Palm Sunday.*

What's that like for you? In what ways have those two realities, the uncertainty of life and the certainty of death, made themselves known in your life?

The reminders of mortality and the fragility of life are all around us. They come every time a friend or loved one dies. And it's even more stark when she or he is our age or younger. The reminder comes with an aging body, a body that no longer does what it used to do or no longer looks like it used to look. It's a bit slower, achier, flabbier, less agile. Illnesses and accidents hold before us how easily and quickly life can change. Mass shootings and terrorist bombings leave us wondering where, when, and who will be next. Hurricanes and wildfires are more reminders of the uncertainty of life. Cemeteries stand as monuments to mortality. And if you've ever sifted the ashes of your life, you've surely wondered where it has gone and where it's going.

So what do we do with that? How do we live with the uncertainty of life and the certainty of death?

As much as we might want to escape those two realities we cannot. Nothing we can do will change or prevent them. But what if naming and facing those realities is the first step in taking back our lives? That's what Ash Wednesday is about. We mark ourselves with the ashes of mortality and fragility. We remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return. And that's a challenge. It's not as easy as it sounds. We can go home and wash off the ashes but the truth remains. Life is fragile and we are mortal.

It would be easy at this point to toss up our hands, surrender to the uncertainty of life, lay down before the certainty of death, and declare that nothing matters. It's all in vain. We could become cynical and hopeless. Surely, that's not what this day is about. Surely, there's more to our life than that.

What if we are marked with the ashes for the exact opposite reason? The ashes of this day do not mark us as a declaration that nothing matters. Instead, the ashes proclaim that everything matters. Nothing is inconsequential. Every word we speak, every action we take, every choice we make matters, makes a difference, and carries consequences. Every person in our life, every relationship, every moment matters. There is nothing that does not matter.

What if Lent is a time of recognizing that. What if it's about remembering and reclaiming our treasures? What if it's about re-treasuring the things and people we've forgotten, taken for granted, ignored, devalued, set to the side?

What if we come at Lent in a different way this year? Let's look for and reclaim what's right. Let's re-treasure the things of our life that are of ultimate importance, the people and things that are of infinite value, worth more than money, prestige, position, power, or stuff. Maybe failing to treasure is what lies behind the pain, brokenness, dysfunction, and violence that too often fill our lives and world. Maybe failing to treasure is the sin from which we need to turn away.

So what if we took this Lenten season as a time of re-treasuring? To re-treasure people and relationships, to re-treasure justice and compassion, to re-treasure love, forgiveness, hope, beauty.

What if our Lenten practice this year was to reclaim and re-treasure that which is of ultimate importance and infinite value? What would it be like to reclaim those treasures in your life? What would it take?

Text in italics is from Rev. Michael K. Marsh.

Here's the link to his sermon:

<https://interruptingthesilence.com/2018/02/17/mortality-and-the-fragility-of-life-an-ash-wednesday-sermon-on-matthew-61-6-16-21/>

The other two mentions are from www.workingpreacher.org