

## “ASHES OF TRUTH”

February 17, 2010

Ash Wednesday (Year C)

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“At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.” See, now is the acceptable time; see now is the day of salvation!

Time is a slippery thing. It’s always disappearing. A good day might seem to fly by. A hard day can last forever. Either way, our time is limited. One day, our lives will be over, and our bodies will become a part of the dust of the universe.

That is truth. Ash Wednesday is an evening of truth; Lent is a season of Truth.

Ashes remind us of hard truths—like sin and death.

Karl Barth, the great Protestant theologian, once noted that death was God’s “no” to all human presumption.

The ashes we receive tonight will remind us of the truth of death, of our mortality, of the nature of human finitude—and that of our loved ones.

Ashes remind of more uncomfortable truth: like the reality of Sin.

There is a good biblical word for a true theology of sin—Lament.

Lament is mourning and wailing; lament is about protest and arguing with God. Lament is about sack-cloth and ash.

Lament is above all, about tears. Lament is truth-telling. Lament is witness. Lament denounces; Lament hopes.

Lament is fundamentally thought, not about our tears—our hopes. It is about a God who weeps.

God is agitated my friends. God is appalled. God burns over a 17-year old Haitian teen, desiring to become a nurse, dying in her cousin’s arms after

several weeks of earth-quake laden hell—of nothing but a broken heart; God weeps when a teenage girl dies of a heart-attack and an attack on life itself--God’s life.

Within the biblical and Christian perspective, sin is that—which deadens, kills and robs us of the life God desires.

Ashes on our heads give a visible public witness to the state of the earth, and its inhabitants, its wounds and cries—and the silence and dust of death. In repentance we lament our own complicity in the infliction of earth’s wounds.

We often mark Lent with some form of self-denial to acknowledge this complicity in the ashes of destroyed life. We might “give something up.”

The urban pastor Jane Carol Redmont, recently returned from Haiti, invites us to take something on--something concrete to symbolize Lament. She writes: “Agitate—Cry--Become Appalled over the injustice in our world. Become one with God--the Lover of Compassion and Justice—longing for us to return Godward—with Tears. Do not only charity for the people of Haiti; become one with God in Agitating—Crying for God’s wounded—As She Does—He Does!”

Ultimate Lament, struggle against our own Sin—is not about us but God; Weep with God this Lent; Cry with God this Lent. Agitate with God this Lent!

But don’t stop there; God does not stop there.

The ultimate truth of lent is not getting real about death or sin.

The ultimate truth is that God’s mercy is greater than our sin. The ultimate truth is that God’s love is the alpha and the omega, the beginning and end.

Yes, God made us out of dust. Yes, Jesus gave his very life to us. We matter—dust as we are! We matter

even if life can lead only 4 or 5 leaves on a pitiful tree.

For our doxology following the offertory tonight, we will stand and sing verse 1 of hymn 379 in the Hymnal 1982 with the words, "God who breathes through all creation, God is love, eternal Love."

The spiritual writer Anne Lamott writes powerfully on the truth of ashes as the ultimate sign of God's love; she writes, "We mark ourselves with ashes to "jog us awake. Ashes signify that we are open to the God who loves us enough to move us towards greater attention, openness and love."

That's a provocative way of looking at ashes. God getting our attention! God reminding me that in spite of all the lamentation, mourning, weeping and agitation—of death itself—God is life and love.

Ann Lamott one was trying to explain the meaning of Ash Wednesday to her 8 year old son—Sam. She was really into it. She thought he was listening with rapt attention. He got up and turned on the TV.

She became furious. Ann writes, "I told him that, in honor of the Ash Wednesday she was trying to teach him—no more cartoons for the next 40 days—no more legos for the next 40 days—and, to the tune of Alvin and the Chipmunks singing Achy, Breaky heart in their nasal, demon-field way—no more TV for the next 40 days—and off with the Tube my hand rammed the remote in deep and profound anger."

"And that is not all; I shouted at the top of my lungs. I cursed. And, then I realized what I had done and was doing—looking at the downcast fifty-pound being with huge, trusting brown eyes. I felt like a parent slapping ET."

"Well, I did what all good parents, I guess, do: calmed down enough to beg for his forgiveness—while at the same time expressing deep disappointment in

his bad character—how often parents express disappointment and forgiveness towards our children at the same time!"

"Only thing I got from Sam; he told me I was the meanest person on earth since Darth Vader."

"Well, I felt bad all day. I dropped him off at school; everywhere I went, I'd see men and women marching purposely by with Ashes on their foreheads."

"I couldn't go to church that night to get my own little ash print, the reminder I was forgiven. I thought about taking Sam out of school so I could apologize some more."

"But I decided to keep my mitts off him. He needed some space and, at seven, he was beginning to separate himself from me—which, in my more rationale moments, I realized this whole scene was about."

You know, I'm not even allowed to tell him I love him these days. "You tell me you love me all the time," he said. "I want you to tell me you LIKE me."

"I said I would really try. That night, when I was tucking him in, I said, "good night honey, I LIKE you a lot...And I'm really sorry for today." The silence in the seconds that followed seemed interminable. "I like you too, Mom. I'm sorry too."

"You know the extent of our messing up," writes Anne, "must not only make God weep, but must make him laugh at times. Like loosing your temper and being unforgiving with a child while trying to explain the meaning of a day which is all about forgiveness. Some things can not be put right. But, so much of the time—it does turn out O.K.—and perhaps always turns out O.K. if we look at from God's perspective which is not about fixing everything but about love." (From Ann Lamott's work, *Traveling Mercies*)

Ashes—a public witness of lament  
yes. Even more profoundly—God's I  
LIKE you—God's breath of eternal love.  
And, yes, God **likes** us too!

Amen!