**A Homily for Ash Wednesday**

Wednesday, March 05, 2014

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

The Rev. Christopher Wendell

As I wrote to you in my Epistle letter this month, to me the ritual of Ash Wednesday is one of the most striking moments in the entire liturgical year. I can only think of a few other times when we engage our physical beings so directly in church ritual: at baptisms, at the foot-washing on Maundy Thursday. But even compared with those moments, receiving the mark of ashes feels even stronger, even starker.

Perhaps that is because the mark of ashes is, fundamentally, a mark of our own mortality. Today we accept willingly, what we often tend to forget, ignore or deny. That we are dust, and to dust we will return. I don’t remember the first time that someone said these words to me – but I do remember the first time I really heard them. They were spoken with such gentleness, such honesty. They lacked any trace of condemnation or shame. As if they were a gift, rather than a curse.

I’ve been pondering this ever since, because it seems to rub against some very deep instincts within me – so deep you might even call them survival instincts. But could those instincts be wrong? Could it be, that our mortality is in fact a gift from God and not a curse?...as that gentle voice was suggesting years ago?

For centuries, Christianity equated human death with sinfulness. In fact, our liturgy tonight will do it several times, suggesting that we die because we are bad, and our mortality is some kind of divine punishment. As if, were we simply good enough, right enough, holy enough, we could somehow escape death. Of course, we know better….and most of the time we can remember.

That theology is outdated in the same way that Newtonian physics is outdated. It might be a quick and easy way to explaining something that looks right….but it fails to take into account what is really true at the most core and fundamental levels of reality. Just like the field of physics evolved into its “quantum” phase, we need a more articulate Christian understanding of mortality, one that might invite us to consider if maybe, even if just in the abstract, we could recognize our mortality not as a curse, but as a blessing.

So I want to offer just two ways in which the season of Lent helps me understand the finite nature of my life as a blessing. First, being reminded that I have limited time on this earth clarifies my intentions and values. We have no time for drama. We have no time for pettiness or meanness. We have no time to lose sleep over things which are trivial and irrelevant. Not every fight matters. Remembering our mortality frees us from needing to win every argument, to out-do every competitor, to win every battle. At least, it should. But how often we forget this week in and week out; how quickly our lives become consumed by these things which do not in fact matter much at all.

This is why in the passage from Isaiah God encourages us not to waste our time doing things in God’s name that don’t transform our hearts: making shows of our piety with long robes and deep bows, becoming grumpy because we are fasting from food…these are not the fasts that God would choose for us. They accomplish very little in terms of transforming either our hearts or the world. And our world, and our hearts need so much transformation. What we do for our faith should matter to ourselves and to others. I urge you to keep this in mind as you choose what you will give up (or take on) for Lent. Is it a fast that God would choose for you?

Second, Lent reminds us our physical death is not the end of everything that matters. Yes, we are dust and to dust we shall return. And not just we, but all that we create, obtain, own, control, manage, and master. It will all at some point be dust. But as people of faith, we believe that there is in fact something that exists beyond ourselves. There is God who exists beyond our own imagining. We did not create God. God created us, and did so as an act of love. The love that God offers to us is an abiding love that nothing, not even death can turn to dust.

This is what Jesus is getting at when he reminds us that where our treasure is, there will our hearts be also. If we orient our lives around ourselves, around the things we can create, own, obtain, and manage, all we have will turn to dust. If we orient our lives around the love of God, we set our hearts upon something – perhaps the only thing – that death cannot conquer. This makes the smallness of my own life not as hard to swallow. Because my small, finite life, is inherently connected to something infinite and good and eternal.

Like Advent before Christmas, Lent is a season of preparation for something more important: Easter. And tonight, Ash Wednesday, is just the beginning of that preparation. We have a whole season to ponder the question of whether the fact that “We are dust and to dust we shall return” is a blessing or a curse. We have a whole season before us to explore the ways in which our lives are oriented around ourselves and the ways they are oriented around the love of God. We have a whole season to try on a new practice, abstinence, or intention to help each of us find more and more of our life’s meaning and purpose in our relationship with a loving God’s.

As your Lent begins, I’ll leave you with one last image, which I hope will help you find some gentleness with yourself in whatever you choose to do for Lent. Re-orienting your heart more towards God’s love is like turning an ocean liner. It takes a lot of effort. It happens slowly. And even a little bit of course correction, when held steady over a long period of time, will make a big different in where you end up. So choose something, just one thing, that will help transform your heart or transform the world – that will give some part of you a new orientation, a new heading. And stick with it as many days as you can. There is a gift waiting for you at the end of that course, even if for awhile it feels like a curse. Amen.