*“Death Cleaning”*

A sermon by the Rev. Rachel Wildman

For Ash Wednesday, 2022

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

Ash Wednesday is a curious day for many of us…The Gospel passage that the church sets before us on Ash Wednesday each year is one in which Jesus exhorts us not to make our spiritual and religious lives performative, instead recommending that we pray alone in private…in secret, actually. And yet this is the one day each year we walk out of church with an incredibly eye-catching black cross on our foreheads! Nothing secret about that…

Our Ash Wednesday service seems to set us up for the very hypocrisy Jesus denounces!

I am quite relieved to say that the church is more self-aware than that, in this case at least.

I don’t think our Ash Wednesday service does, in fact, lure us into hypocrisy…if we come to it with hearts open, both the Gospel and the ashes become apiece…an interwoven invitation to a Holy Lent.

Let me walk you through what this night means to me….

When Jesus exhorts his followers to pray in secret, he is asking them—*us*-- to turn toward God authentically. *I* happen think that he suggests the private, secret piece because it leaves no opportunity for us to leave the authentic center of ourselves and, instead, filter our repentance—our turn toward God-- through our perceptions of what others think of us, or what others’ describe as the “*right*” qualities of repentance. Jesus names the spiritual necessity of coming to God completely as we are—not as we wish we were…not as others seem to be. In my experience, he is right that one very effective way of feeling safe enough come to God bare, is to pray to God far out of earshot and eyeshot of even our most beloved family members.

This night asks us to do the same…In inviting us to a Holy Lent, it, too, is asking us to come to God as our most authentic selves…to find a secret place this Lent far from the gaze of those whose opinions we care about, in which to meet our God and receive the gift of God’s affirmation*,* God’s proclamation of us as BELOVED even just as we are*..*.*especially* just as we are. Discipleship—the work of being *Christ’s own Body* once he has died, resurrected, and ascended—requires us to be rooted in our identity as God’s beloved—as continual recipients of God’s radical, unconditional love.

But what of the ashes…the very visible ashes, which could easily become a performative action that we do to impress others, or worse, to mark ourselves as *more holy* than others? To me, they are a related, though slightly different, invitation.

To me, the ashes are the church’s acknowledgment that preparing for Jesus’ death and resurrection cannot *only* be about authenticity in our relationship with *God*…a Holy Lent must also be about authenticity in our relationships *with one another*. And there really is nothing like staring death in the face to make things very real in our relationships. Everything performative in a relationship, everything inauthentic falls away when we stare at death. Sitting with folks who are facing their own deaths has taught me that much.

This week, someone posted an article on social media about a new home organizing discipline called “Death Cleaning.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Death cleaners are hired most often by elderly adults who want to save their children from the task of having to cull through their belongings after their deaths. Death Cleaners don’t come in and throw stuff out, they come alongside folks as they go through everything—encouraging them to go slowly, taking the time to read every old letter and spend time with each old photo. Becoming present to the past within the context of preparing for his or her death very often leads the client to clarity about what, or more often WHO, is important NOW, with the finite time that is left.

So, the best death cleaners often end up needing to facilitate the inclusion of children and grandchildren, friends and vocational partners who may still be alive. The process, when done with care, creates opportunities to say things that have long gone unsaid, to be a vehicle for reconciliation…to spur each member of the relationship to activate the power of their love while they still have time left to share it. Death cleaning is, for many, an incredibly empowering and freeing experience— liberating for the client *and* for all those who will one day be left behind. Most folks interviewed wished they had done it earlier.

The church’s invitation to a Holy Lent on Ash Wednesday is an invitation to a Death Cleaning of sorts…

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

That cross of ash which seems at first pass like it could be performative is not at all, if we let it move us as it is intended to… so bold, so visible, that we will not be able to miss the reality that our time here on earth *is* finite. And in that reality, we will be compelled to the work of reconciliation…to leveraging the power of our love to liberate those with whom we are traveling while we still can.

And the brilliant thing about the ashes on our foreheads is that not only are they a powerful visual metaphor for our deaths, spurring us to mending relationships, but their success as such a metaphor is only achieved in the context *of* relationships…of community! The placement of the ashes on our foreheads, in that same spot where the cross of oil was placed during our baptisms marking us as Christ’s own forever, keeps us from being able to see our own ashen cross. The only ash marks we can see are one another’s. We need one another, or at least one another’s foreheads, to unleash the powerful invitation of the ashes.

So, when all is said and done, this night—Ash Wednesday—is not hypocritical…it is merely honoring the truth that to prepare to become again *Christ’s own Body* in this time and place, we will need to practice baring our authentic selves to God, *and* to those to whom Christ’s radical love calls us.

So, do both this Holy Lent!! Over these next 6 weeks, steal away to your secret places so that you can enter completely bare, into the warmth of God’s unconditional love for you…*and*… *this* night, bear your ashes boldly, for one another—for reconciliation…for liberation… for all those whom Christ’s love, manifest in you, can reach.

AMEN.

1. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/25/realestate/how-to-discover-the-life-affirming-comforts-of-death-cleaning.html?action=click&algo=bandit-all-surfaces_filter_new_arm_3_1&alpha=0.05&block=editors_picks_recirc&fellback=false&imp_id=685392843&impression_id=75854ee7-9827-11ec-a518-098d207d0ebe&index=1&pgtype=Article&pool=pool%2Fe76d7165-92f7-4bd2-bc6e-298322d3680a&region=footer&req_id=974382128&surface=eos-home-featured&variant=0_bandit-all-surfaces_filter_new_arm_3_1&fbclid=IwAR3HaRV05gvPt7lMF1S1fkomY2Jlg9H7Z3GmISHa7tLWcMzlNopOnTVpNvgAccessed> 2/28/22 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)