

Ash Wednesday
February 10, 2016
The Church of the Holy Cross
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Hypocrites and Humility

When reading the scriptures for today I was reminded of a lesson my Dad taught me. “Be wary when someone you have just met says to you, ‘Trust me.’” You might think this a strange lesson for a daughter to learn from father who is a used car salesman, but indeed, it is exactly what he said to me. Instead, I learned to trust people by observing what they did, how they treated others, how they gave or took credit for the things, if they were kind, and compassionate. Did they boast like those from the Gospel? “Do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others.”

The word Hypocrite comes from the Greek *hypokrite*, which designated an actor who performed behind a mask. Metaphorically, it is someone who pretends to be something that they are not.

Humility, as I have best heard it defined is, knowing what you are not.

I think it is easy to be a hypocrite. I think that in our fast-paced society we are driven to be self-sufficient. Driven to gather earthly treasure around us. Driven to keep up with the Jones’ and, in fact, to surpass them. We strive for bigger, better, status. Go big or go home! I think we often fool ourselves into believing that we are more than we are, and that propels us even further into the plot that becomes the play of our lives—and we begin to believe our own illusions. Sometimes without meaning to, we find ourselves wearing masks as we build relationships in the world. We learn to hide behind masks, and we wear them so often, that we forget we have them on—we lose sight of our authentic selves, and then we lose site of God, and each other.

Lent is a time when we remove our masks. Not so much to show the world who we truly are, but to take a good, long look at ourselves in the mirror, and get honest with ourselves about our lives.

Building successful relationships with God and other people, starts with building an honest and sincere relationship with ourselves first. We need to be able to trust ourselves, know who we are, and know who we are not, if we are going to experience the peace that passes all understanding in our hearts.

How we look at our actions, our lives, and then repent of our sins and make course corrections on our spiritual journey is a customized and individual process. No one can do this for us. We can invite people to help guide us, we can follow practices and disciplines, and all in hopes of discovering who we are in the process. But, it is a process, and I encourage you to practice a spiritual discipline during Lent. Whether it is one that has been made available to you through the resources of the church—there are several options available on the table in the Upper Room. Or, whether you map out your own path through Lent, I encourage you to practice a discipline. Pick a direction and head in it. If it’s not the right way for you, you will know—then pick another. The key here is to start, to try, and to pray for direction—invite God to be with you during Lent.

Once we discover who we are, and who we are not, then comes the time for us to reflect on what we have done, and what we have left undone. If we have taken off our masks—and are no longer fooling ourselves into believing that we are more than we are—recognizing what we have done, and what we have left undone will be an easier task.

Knowing in my heart what I have done, and how I have sinned is the first step toward repentance and reconciliation. True repentance and reconciliation is an awesome feeling, a freeing of the soul, and it gives us the feeling of being spiritually washed clean.

Anyone who has spent a day playing sports, in hard labor, gardening, going to the gym, and really working up a sweat, knows the feeling of finally getting into the shower and being washed clean—letting the water pour over you and wash away the residue, the dirt, and the grit. Repenting of your sins, praying for forgiveness, and being reconciled to yourself, to God, and to your neighbors brings a deep and refreshing sense of joy to your soul. We are washed clean in the water of Baptism, and we are washed clean when we are repentant and forgiven.

Our time on earth is temporal, and too often, we spend that time focused on how much earthly treasure we can amass while we are here. God wants us to focus on the fact that our souls are eternal, and our actions of love for one another store up for us eternal treasure. Eternal treasure, forged with love, is far more valuable. The impact eternal treasure has on this earth will far outlast any amount of earthly treasure that will rust and be stolen.

The rhythm of Ash Wednesday is quite different from the rest of Lent with its focus so unflinchingly on repentance. It is a genuine community day of participation in the rite of reconciliation. We only have two of those days each year, and the other is Good Friday.

On this day I think we need to hear what Leo Tolstoy said, "In the name of God, stop for a moment, close your work, and look around you." Take today and look around you, think about what you value most in life, change your pattern.

We can't look up, or outward if we are turned inward, on ourselves in unhealthy ways. We cannot see God if we have crawled into a fetal position around what keeps us from God. For the next Forty days, we have a lot of work to do, and the work begins in our hearts. We are all just trying to do the best we can. Ash Wednesday reminds us that we are dust, and that we are broken and cracked. But we have hope and we can be redeemed, like Leonard Cohen once said, "There is a crack in everyone—that's how light gets in."

My friend John Ohmer asked an interesting question in a recent blog*, "When it's Easter Sunday and Lent is over, how will I know if my Lent has been successful?" How will we know if we have had a good Lent?

A good Lent starts with good Lenten resolutions: self-examination and repentance, prayer, fasting, self-denial, and reading and meditating on scripture.

We change when we spend more time in the loving, presence of God. We change when we spend more time in prayer, worship, and serving others. It is also important to remember not to be afraid. Self-discovery can be scary, but we are not alone if we invite

God in to walk with us on our Lenten journey.

So our Lent will be a success if, by Easter Sunday, we act differently and look differently, not because we're still *resolving to* act and look different...but because we are different; we are transformed—transfigured as Jesus was in our lesson last week.

The thing about Ash Wednesday and Lent is this: We realize who we are and what we have done that has separated us from the love of God. We repent our sins. We try and live into our lives as forgiven souls, doing the best we can to do God's work in the world. All the time we are aware that we are only dust—dust in the wind. And someday, to that same dust we shall return.

Not that I ever overthink things, but I had to wonder, “What kind of dust am I?” I like to think that we are stardust. Because just like us, stardust shines in the light of God!

Amen

* Text paraphrased from a recent blog: <http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?ca=71a95a81-281b-458b-b33a-0fa008b6c7e2&c=77bf6bd0-f82c-11e3-83c9-d4ae52a2cb52&ch=77c3d8a0-f82c-11e3-83c9-d4ae52a2cb52>