

Wednesday, February 26, 2020

Ash Wednesday (Year A)

Isaiah 58.1-12; 2 Corinthians 5.20b—6.10; Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Crosses of Ash: One of the Most Life-Giving Things We Can Do”

What we do on this day is perhaps one of the most honest things we can do in our life of faith. It is also one of the most life-giving things we can do. Why is that? It’s all in the ashes.

As I thought about how I was going to preach Ash Wednesday this year, I thought about the varied themes of the day. There are, of course, ashes. And then there is the Gospel reading, with Jesus talking about various practices of piety. Namely, giving alms, prayer, and fasting. The three disciplines that have come to be associated with Lent. In the past, my Ash Wednesday sermons have always focused on these Lenten disciplines. But this year, I was pulled in a different direction. To ashes and just what they symbolize.

While our primary image of the day is ashes, none of our readings focus on ashes. The only reference is in our Old Testament reading from Isaiah, which contains precisely one mention of ashes. In God questioning the people about the purpose of fasting, he asks, “Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?” (Is 58.5b). For the ancient Israelites, donning sackcloth and sitting in ashes was a mourning ritual associated with fasting. The ashes were a sign of grief and of repentance. Sitting in ashes was a sign of disgrace and humiliation. Debasing oneself as a recognition of falling short and as an expression of the desire for repentance. The desire to turn around and do better.

As for our own traditions, the ritual of sprinkling ashes over the head or making the sign of the cross in ashes on the forehead with the words “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return” is an ancient custom credited to Pope Gregory the Great. Yes, the Gregory for which our parish is named. The words “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return” are based on the words God spoke to Adam and Eve after their fall, and are meant to serve as a reminder to us of our sinfulness and mortality. These words and the accompanying action of placing ashes on our forehead contain an implicit reminder of our need to repent. And also contain an implicit hope and promise of the salvation and eternal life that were obtained on our behalf through Christ’s death on the cross.

It is the themes of sin and death that capture my imagination on this Ash Wednesday. But even more so, it is the image of ash crosses in which I find particular meaning this year. Now, admittedly, in our 21st century American culture, we don’t like to think about sin or death. The prevailing image our culture seeks to convey is that we are perfect—or that we can become perfect—and that we will live forever. If not in actuality, that we can live on through our legacy—our children, our estate, our good works. Or at least, those are the hopes, even though we know these are illusions. Or maybe, delusions. So we try to pretend that sin doesn’t exist. Or if it does, it is something others struggle with, not us. And as for death, we just prefer not to talk about it. Yet we know in our heart of hearts that we are sinful, mortal beings. So that’s

where ash crosses come in. It is this image that seeks to redeem the sinfulness and mortality that we so adamantly seek to deny.

The crosses of ash that we place on our foreheads are indeed one of the most honest things we can do as Christians. Marking our foreheads with ash, we acknowledge that we will indeed die and will return to dust. Crosses of ash are a visible reminder and acknowledgement of our own mortality. But at the same time, it is through the cross of Christ, symbolized by the cross of ash, that we are promised true and eternal life. A cross of ash placed on our forehead this day is a trace, a shadow, of the life-giving cross that is marked on our foreheads at baptism with the words “you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own for ever.” While we journey through Lent on our quest to repent and return to God, we are reminded by the cross of ash that we have already been reconciled to God through Christ. That through the cross of Christ, sin and death no longer have dominion over us.

In her book, *A Simple Path*, Mother Teresa writes: “Dying is not the end, it is just the beginning. Death is a continuation of life. This is the meaning of eternal life; it is where our soul goes to God, to be in the presence of God, to see God, to speak to God, to continue loving him with greater love. We only surrender our body in death – our heart and our soul live forever. Yesterday is gone and tomorrow has not yet come; we must live each day as if it were our last so that when God calls us we are ready, and prepared, to die with a clean heart.” This is the intention behind the ash crosses we place on our foreheads this day.

The ash cross is, therefore, also a reminder of how we are to live between now and the time of our death. The ash cross calls us to have a new perspective on how we live our life in light of the death we will one day experience. In light of the cross that is placed on our forehead as a reminder of who we are and whose we are. Those crosses of ash are nothing short of a branding. In ranching, branding is a method of proving ownership or origin of an animal—who they belong to. So, too, we are branded with the sign of the cross, both at baptism and every Ash Wednesday, to indicate who we belong to.

In our Gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus talks about our acts of piety. Through these Jesus seeks to convey the radical life changes that are called forth in the kingdom of God. The kingdom we live in even now, by virtue of submitting to having the cross placed on our heads—in oil at baptism and in ash on Ash Wednesday.

The Lenten disciplines of praying, fasting, and giving alms all symbolize a turning away from self-indulgence and turning toward caring for our neighbor and relying on God. An attitude that we often refer to as “dying to self.” A metaphorical death that is also represented by the cross of ash. Such Lenten disciplines as prayer, fasting, and giving of alms open us up to God and to our neighbor. Acts that bring us into closer relationship with God and one another. This is what Paul is talking about in our Epistle reading from 2 Corinthians, where he urges the Corinthians to accept and live within the new relationship with God that has been made available through Christ—particularly through his death on the cross.

The cross of ash is a mark indicating our confession of sinfulness, our sorrow at how we have fallen short, our desire for repentance, and our desire to turn back to God. The cross of ash is

our recognition of our own mortality, and the hope and promise of salvation through the cross of Christ. The cross of ash is also liberating. It is a sign of our acceptance of who we are and our need to rely on God. It is a sign of putting ourselves in God's hands. Only then can God truly work to transform us into the fullness of who we were created to be as his beloved children.

Ash Wednesday ushers in our forty-day period of prayer, fasting, and giving of alms, with a call to repentance, anticipating the certain hope of salvation. Actions that are an outward sign of our intention to turn around and back toward God. We mark this day, this intention, with crosses of ash, as a sign of who we are and whose we are. As an acknowledgment of both our sinfulness and the reality of our death. As acknowledgement of the hope and promise of salvation and eternal life that are procured for us through another cross—the cross of Christ. And as a promise to repent and turn back toward the life-giving ways of God.

Those crosses of ash that we humbly take upon ourselves are our response to Paul's injunction: "We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5.20b). To live into the full meaning of the cross of Christ as symbolized by the cross of ash placed on our heads. That is certainly one of the most life-giving things we could possibly do. And living into that symbol, through our Lenten journey and beyond, is even more life-giving.