

C Ash Wednesday 3.6.19

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Focus Statement: We cannot make it on our own, that's why Jesus does it for us.

On Monday morning, after listening to a sermon podcast on the Ash Wednesday texts, which repeat over and over again “don't be like the hypocrites,” I opened the paper to an article on the recent turmoil in the Methodist, Catholic, and Southern Baptist churches, and the following quote from Rev. Jim Wallace, “The ‘nones’” – and by ‘nones’ I mean n-o-n-e-s, people who are disenchanted with institutional religion—“the nones want their lives to make a difference... They're not going to join a religion that's not making a difference or, worse yet, is full of hypocrisy.” Hypocrisy is not a word that just pops up all the time, yet in the span of an hour, I heard it in the Bible and the Battle Creek Enquirer. Theologian Karl Barth is famous for saying a preacher ought to approach the sermon with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. I see what you did there, Holy Spirit, clearly something needs to be said about this question of hypocrisy.

Of course, we know the sort of religious people Jesus is warning us about in this Gospel text. The annoying ones. The ones with the What Would Jesus Do bumper stickers who cut you off in traffic. Or who get all bent out of shape when someone doesn't say “Merry Christmas” to them while showing no real sign of the selfless love that is the gift of Jesus. Or who give money or clothing or something, and want to make a huge deal about how gracious and generous they are. Or who quote scripture about who is excluded from God's favor while conveniently ignoring the many times the Bible encourages love for ones neighbor and even ones enemies, and for the care for the stranger, the alien, the orphan, and the widow. You know, those sorts of religious people.

And there's the rub. Because the tricky, slippery thing about hypocrisy is as soon as we start identifying it as "those other people," people not nearly as gracious and thoughtful and well-read as ourselves, is when we start down the path to hypocrisy.

And this problem of self-congratulatory piety is not an individual problem; it is a corporate sin of the church. We in the ELCA cannot watch the struggles of our Methodist siblings or our Catholic siblings, or Southern Baptist siblings and feel detached or superior. Not only are we, as Cain once denied at the very beginning of civilization, our brother's keeper, but we are also not immune to these same sins. In 2009, the ELCA made a different choice than the Methodists made last week and started ordaining openly gay clergy, but LGBTQ pastors still wait way longer for a call than straight clergy. Unlike the Catholic Church we allow clergy to marry, but that does not immune us from predatory pastors who take advantage of their power and seeming closeness to God. And yes unlike the Southern Baptists we've been ordaining women since the 70s, but as a woman I can assure you, pastoring is still very much a man's world.

Don't be like the hypocrites, Jesus told the disciples. But when we get down to it, when we're truly honest with ourselves, the hypocrites are us. After I finish talking, we're going to do the long period of Confession and Forgiveness we go through each Ash Wednesday, and if you're anything like me, a lot of the things we're going to confess are going to sound uncomfortably familiar. Not loving God with our whole heart, not loving our neighbors as ourselves. Shutting our ears to calls to service, pride, envy, apathy, self-indulgent appetites,

negligence in prayer and worship, failing to share the faith, neglecting those in need, prejudice, contempt, the list will go on.

And this, believe it or not, is the good news of Ash Wednesday. Because a list like this, an honest accounting of our real struggles and shortfalls, this sort of truth-telling is the antidote to hypocrisy. And at the end of this whole list of things we've done wrong, mistakes we've made, people we've hurt, places we've failed, at the end of all of that is the promise that you are forgiven. That you are redeemed, that you are made new, made right, made whole, in the cross of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, and that in you, through you, is the work of God's salvation.

Today is the day that we remember that we are mortal, that we are broken, that we are human, that our time on earth and our ability to act is limited. Today we remember, we are reminded that we come from the dust, and that the promise of our mortality is that we will be dust again. And today is the day we also remember what God can do with dust. Back in the beginning, back in Genesis, the scriptures tell us of how God took dust, how God took *adamah*, and from that dust made humanity, made Adam, which we think of as a name but which literally translates to dirt part. This dust that we are, and to which we will return, it is the same stuff from which the galaxies are made. God made, God makes, beautiful, amazing, incredible things, out of dust.

Today is also the day that we remember that while we are mortal, broken, limited, God is not. But God became those things for us. God who is immortal, whole, divine, limitless,

slipped into human skin, took on the dustiness of our flesh, in the person of Jesus Christ.

God became one of us to redeem God's relationship with us. Jesus Christ died for us, so that death itself would be destroyed.

Yes, we are mortal, we are human, we are broken. But God is not. And this ashy cross is a reminder to us not just of our humanity, but of God's divinity, and just how invested, just how in love with us, just how committed to us God is. Nothing, not even death itself can separate God from that which God formed from the dust. We cannot do this on our own, and the good news of this ashy cross is we don't have to. God who formed us from the clay is still forming us, again and again.

And with these ashy crosses on our foreheads, we will come forward around this table again, for the meal that is nourishment for our souls. A foretaste of the heavenly feast when all are renewed at God's own table.

So today, dear people of God, hear this invitation to let down your guard, let down the need to have it all together, to pretend you ever could, and just be in the hands of the God who formed you, who is still forming you, and who loves every broken piece of you. You are dust, formed from the stuff of God, and to that same God you have always belonged. Amen.