

Ash Wednesday

Year C

Feb 17, 2010

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 and Matthew 6:1-6. 16-21

“Yet even now, says the LORD,
return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
rend your hearts and not your clothing.”

When Joel was writing his prophecy, it was customary for people to wear sackcloth and ashes and to tear their clothes as public displays of mourning and penitence. This was their tradition. Their religious custom - their ritual. For the community of faith, this was how they gave expression to what they believed and for what they hoped.

Joel was speaking to the people:

Blow the trumpet in Zion;
sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near--
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness!

Uh-oh.

Get out the sackcloth. This does not look pretty.

If not a huge army of warriors than at least a devastating plague of locusts is on the horizon, threatening the very lives of the people. In their understanding this “act of God” is retribution for the way they were behaving. In order to spare themselves, they would offer to God these signs of penitence.

But God says to them, no no no. You have it all wrong. I do not want anymore displays. I do not want empty ritual.

I want your hearts.

Return to me.

And then centuries later we hear Jesus speaking to his followers during what we refer to as the Sermon on the Mount:

- whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you
- whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners
- whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting

Do not think this is an example of Jesus tearing into the hypocrites. It is not that Jesus is being hateful.

For this story isn't about how bad those awful hypocrites are. (As much as we might like to believe that is the case!)

No, Jesus is directing his message to us.

To all of us who can so easily be led astray by our own sense of self satisfaction.

“Oh phew; I'm not one to make a display of my piety. I'm safe from the admonishments of our Lord. Maybe God will have something to say to ME tomorrow.”

And so we continue to wander in a dry wilderness of our own making, in our wilderness of self satisfaction.

No problem Jesus. I won't tell others how much I gave to Haiti Relief efforts. I won't go downtown to preach this week. I won't disfigure my face today.

This is easy, right?

Our culture dictates we don't talk about our money publicly. We also don't stand on street corners. It's un-American to mix church and state. And we don't disfigure our faces; because then we would just look bad. And that is the absolute last thing that we want.

We want so much for others to think well of us. And this is not a bad thing at all. We want to be acknowledged for who we are and, as we heard on Sunday, we are all bright and shining children of God.

The problem comes when we FOCUS on what other people think, rather than what God desires.

The problem comes when we act in order to impress others, rather than to open ourselves up to God.

We may do good things for others. We may give up chocolate for lent, or even - God forbid – facebook to prove just how disciplined we can be.

Really though I don't think what we do or don't do matters that much to God.

All that matters to God is that our actions come from a place entirely given over to God.

I believe God is interested in one thing only: God wants your heart.

Today.

During the 40 days of Lent.

During the Easter Season and Beyond.

God wants you to rend your hearts, tear them open where they can rest exposed to God.

In his book Mere Christianity, CS Lewis puts it this way:

Christ says, "Give me all. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want you.... Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked—the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself: my own will shall become yours."

God has given us the greatest gift for which we could ever hope. God gave us God's very self. And it is our very selves God wants in return. We do not have to sacrifice, because the sacrifice has already been made for us.

All we have to do, is accept the Gift.

I say that as if it is easy.... "all we have to do..."

I know to rend our hearts, to tear them open, to accept the gift of Gods unconditional love, is difficult.

For many it is like stepping off a cliff into the unknown.

For many, it would be so much easier just to give alms, pray and fast.

I know, deep in my heart, that it would be much easier for me to just give more, pray more, fast more this lent than it would be for me to face the unknown.

But I also know that would be missing the point of why we gather here today.

"The ritual of imposition of the ashes is a sobering reminder of our mortality," says one insightful preacher. "Receiving the ashes with the words "You are dust and to dust you shall return" is a gentle whisper that says, "It is not about you (Jeffery L. Tribble Sr. in Feasting on the Word, Year B, p 24)."

It is not about you.

It is not about what you can do.

It is not about who you can impress.

It is not about your image.

Hear the gentle whisper:

Rend you hearts. Glorify God.

Amen.