

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

Ash Wednesday 2015; Feb. 18th

Readings: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 103:8-14; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21.

Ashes, Sin, and Seeds of Grace

A few weeks ago, I preached a sermon about Marcus Borg and his excellent work in challenging what he terms the “heaven and hell” framework that has informed much of Christian theology for hundreds of years.

A “heaven and hell” framework focuses on sin and our need for forgiveness in order to go to heaven rather than to hell when we die. Borg characterizes this framework as a “black hole that sucks the meaning of Christian language into it, changing it and distorting it.”¹

This heaven and hell framework has been a very negative thing in many people’s experience of the Church and Christianity, as it is often has caused needless and damaging shame and fear.

So here we are on Ash Wednesday...lots of talk and prayer about sin today.

How are we to deal with Ash Wednesday in a real way, in a healthy way, in a way that moves beyond the heaven and hell framework and yet does not discount or minimise the presence of sin in our world and in our lives?

How do we experience Ash Wednesday as mature Christians?

It is not really that difficult, if we start with God rather than ourselves.

And what I mean by starting with God, is to remember that God loves you more than you can imagine; God came to us in Jesus, came into the world, to be close to us and to help us with all that is difficult in

¹ Borg, Marcus J. *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power---And How They Can Be Restored*. HarperCollins Epub., 2011, p. 15 of 238.

our lives personally and in the world.

This is our foundation...our strong foundation upon which to build our faith generally and, on this Ash Wednesday, our understanding of sin and the purpose and opportunity of Lent, as a season in our life.

The heaven and hell framework would tell us that God is a punishing Father who is always watching to see when we will mess up. This is the sort of way of understanding the Christian faith that causes young children who are Roman Catholic to make up things for confession, things that they did not do, so that they have something to say...because they must have done something wrong, really wrong, because there is this whole system in place that is focusing on sin.

Before we can realistically deal with the matter of sin in our lives, we need to take a moment to remember who God is for us...our Savior, the one who loves us and always seeks us and always welcomes us home.

When we start there, we start to live into a mature understanding of the situation in which we find ourselves...and Ash Wednesday starts to make more sense.

We begin to see the grace of this day and of the season of Lent. So many people over the years have told me that they don't like Lent...they don't like the music...some have said, "see you on Easter." But the grace of Lent is not to be missed.

It can be an important time of refreshment as we do some self-examination, some repentance, but also reflection on the God of our Salvation, who desires that we live...and that we live into the fullness of life, freed from our sins and this sin of the world.

When we receive the ashes and hear the words, “remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

This is not you are dust in the sense of you are “nothing.”

Far from it.

We are God’s beloved...part of God’s creation...it is said that we are made of star dust, as everything came together to form the earth and life on earth.

And this day also helps us to remember that we are God’s creation and not God.

We are human and to be human means to be mortal...and all that being human involves, all the triumphs and all the limitations.

For some that might be hard to hear, but for those of us engaged with God and the spiritual life...this life, knowing the spiritual dimension of it...this is grace...to know our limits and are need for God, and yes, our need for God’s forgiveness.

We remember that we are dust, and we remember who God seeks to be for us.

We hear in Psalm 103, God remembers that we are dust...and God does not brush us way but rather is full of compassion and mercy for us.

Being real about who we are, and seeking greater connection, deeper, fresh, refreshing connection with God...this is what Ash Wednesday and Lent are can be for us.

Our Gospel reading from Matthew says a lot about what not to do, but if we study this text we see that it is not the actions themselves that we are not to do, but how we think about them or understand them.

Alms giving--charitable practices, fasting, praying, piety, or we might say, spiritual practices, are all good when done to God’s glory and in seeking to deepen our relationship with God...but not, as the scripture warns, as something to be done so that others are impressed.

That would be to miss the point...that would be to limit our vision for what this time can be about for us.

Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent can be a time to remember what is most true about ourselves and about God...and to make some space in our thoughts and in our lives for such reflection...and when we make some space...God is right there...right there for us...to fill that space with grace and love. We might even have an image for this...and I offer one to you now...we make some space for God to plant seeds of grace...seeds that can germinate during this time of Lent.

I found this advice about seeds online.

If you're a gardening enthusiast, you know there's nothing more thrilling than seeing the first tiny green shoots come up after you've planted seeds. To germinate seeds you will need to give them the correct type of soil and make sure they get the right amount of sun or shade, plus regulate the temperature so they don't get too hot or cold.

<http://www.wikihow.com/Germinate-Seeds>

The correct type of soil and the right temperature...to continue this image, metaphor, during Lent we can seek to create the right sort of environment in our lives, in our hearts for the seeds God is always planting in us to be able to develop.

You might even want to imagine what this seed looks like for you.

We can be patient with our seeds, giving them all of Lent to germinate.

You might want to imagine or even draw or artistically create the environment for God's seeds of grace in you, how do you want to create that environment...what does it look like?

Think of God as the gardener who has planted the seeds, and as that advice I found said about one who plants...imagine God as a gardening enthusiast, who takes great care in planting just the right seed in each of us, and is thrilled to see the first tiny green shoots emerge, all in God's time. Amen.