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Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

February 10, 2016; Ash Wednesday

Readings: Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 103:8-14; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10;

Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

The Fast That God Desires

What is the point of Ash Wednesday and of Lent for that matter?

We come here, to this service, to receive ashes on our heads, a very visible sign of our mortality and penitence, and yet, Jesus tells us not to display our piety before others.

There seems to be a conflict.

What to do?

Do we wipe the cross off before leaving church?

That is not really the issue.

This day and our actions are about more than what others can see on our foreheads, perhaps it is more about what they can see through our actions in the world because we take Ash Wednesday seriously.

Jesus is rather clear: when we humble ourselves to be seen by others, we have already received the reward of that...meaning that pious action as an end itself is not what we are to be about.

I will say that this is less of a problem in our time than in Jesus' time or Isaiah's time or even the first half of the last century...in that, we are not here today/tonight to be seen by others...we are not worried that if we don't go to an Ash Wednesday service, our neighbors or our boss will wonder about our morality.

As a culture, we come to church because we like to come to church; we like to worship God; we connect with God here; we connect with each other; we are strengthened to face the challenges in our lives in and in the world.

The notion that this is a day of “holy obligation,” for better or worse, does not mean much in our culture anymore, even in the culture of the Episcopal Church.

On this day, we come to acknowledge and confess that we are not perfect; we make mistakes; we don’t always act like the people we know ourselves to be, our best selves, made in God’s image.

As well, we come to experience God’s grace, to hear that God knows we are mortal, and to be with others who know that as well.

God knows that we are not perfect; God knows that we are but dust...yes, dust, but God’s dust...beloved of God, who knows our limitations and has come to save us.

We are penitent; we are here to repent, to turn around; we are here to turn from sin...sin being that which distances us from God.

Sin gets in the way of our relationship with God, distracts us from God and who we are for God..., but, and this is very important---

God never turns away from us,
God never distances God’s self from us;
God is always with us, loving us, and calling
us into closer and deeper relationship.

Sometimes people feel that they have done something that is unforgivable or so bad that God doesn’t want anything to do with them.

That is never true; God forgives all who repent; God always wants to be in relationship with us.

God is always in relationship with us.

Ash Wednesday helps us to live into God’s love by being real about who we are.

In our world that is focused on success---a world in which some would never dare admit a mistake---Ash Wednesday is a great gift to us.

We can be real with God and we can be real with each other...and there is

much grace to be found in that reality.

The prophet Isaiah had much to say about empty rituals and about those who acted righteous but were not.

Listening to Isaiah helps us to avoid a personal piety that is narrow and self-serving.

As one commentator notes, “Clearly, the prophet’s denunciation of a piety so rich in itself that it has become blind to the needs of others (as well as to its own poverty) burns here with a relentless intensity.”¹

Isaiah is addressing the people of God living during the time of exile. The people complain that they are fasting but God does not seem to notice.

In response to their complaint, we hear:

*Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.*

*Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.²*

Religious rituals that fail to influence how we act outside of these walls are not doing what true religion and true spirituality are meant to do.

God through Isaiah is very clear...something is not working...they fasting but continue to oppress their workers.

As Thomas Currie states, “The danger of worship concerned only with one’s own salvation is not its immorality or lack of authenticity, but its blindness.

When we suffer from such idolatry, only ‘the fast God chooses’ is able

¹ David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, gen. eds., *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year C, Vol. 2, Thomas W. Currie, “Theological Perspective,” Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, Epub. Loc 253 of 19741.

² Isaiah 58:3b-4a

to render the neighbor visible to us.”³

What is the fast that God requires?

What is the fast that will help us be more God’s people in the world?

Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,

to undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free,

and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,

and bring the homeless poor into your house;

when you see the naked, to cover them,

and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,

*and your healing shall spring up quickly;*⁴

This period of Lent which we enter today, gives us time to open up some space for God in our lives, to pray about the fast that God calls us to.

Take time in these first days of Lent, or for most of Lent, to pray about the fast that God desires for you.

What sort of fast will help you grow in your relationship with God and others?

How will our repentance this day be manifest in the world?

That is exciting to consider!

In what new ways will our light be known in the world?

³ *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2, Epub. Loc 275.

⁴ Isaiah 58:6-8a

When our fast helps us to bring justice and freedom to others, then as Isaiah says, “Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly.”

I think of Grant’s sermon from this Sunday past.

He spoke of unveiling our faces for others and letting our light shine.

It is not easy to be that open to people, to be that authentic, that vulnerable.

One way of finding the freedom to be for others, perhaps a most important way, is through repentance.

Piety has a negative connotation in our time...because is often thought of as self-absorbed.

But when we do these things, confess our sins, receive a mark of our mortality and repentance, not for the sake of people admiring us, but out of a desire for a renewed relationship with God, our actions today can bring us a freedom that enables us to be for others.

As Eugene March puts it, “Ash Wednesday is an appropriate time to reflect again on what should be an inseparable relationship of inward repentance and outward actions with regard for the undoing and overcoming of the destructiveness worked by human sin within the human communities in which we live.”⁵

⁵ David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, gen. eds., *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year C, Vol. 2, W. Eugene March, “Exegetical Perspective,” Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, Epub. Loc 394 of 19741.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, through love you have made us, and for love you call us to repentance. Grant that we who seek to mend our sinful ways may find strength in your compassion and forgiveness. Restore to us the joy of your salvation; give us your Holy Spirit that we may serve you with willing hearts, bearing witness to your abundant mercy in all the world; through Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. *Amen.*⁶

⁶ Kimberly Bracken Long, editor, *Feasting on the Word Worship Companion, Liturgies For Year C, Vol. 1, Advent Through Pentecost*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012, Epub, p. 98.