

## Ash Wednesday, Year A: 9 March 2011

In the ritual cycle of her seasons, the Church sets aside one day a year for the faithful to gather and communally “bemoan our manifold sins and wickedness,” as the language of the old Prayer Book Confession puts it. This day is Ash Wednesday, the Christian Day of atonement, and the heart of its liturgy is the Litany of Penitence that we shall recite in a few minutes. The imposition of ashes that precedes it is intended to give this central theme of penitence ceremonial embodiment. Taken together these proper rites remind us that we stand before God as sinners, in broken relationship caused through our own fault, and that it is only through God’s unconditional gift of compassionate love that we can hope for anything else.

Strong language, but these are classically Ash Wednesday themes. They strike the ear so vividly because they are not the prevalent themes of our current Prayer Book rites, which take a more celebratory stance before God. But I hasten to say that they are not the only Lenten themes either, and we make a mistake if we try to make the whole of Lent one long Ash Wednesday. Lent is as much a season of renewal as of repentance, thus the words of our closing hymn this coming Sunday “God brings new beauty nigh: reply with love to love most high,” or the words of the Lenten Eucharistic preface that speak of preparing “with joy” for the coming feast. These elements—renewal and joy—are as important to our Lenten observance as prayer, fasting, and self-denial. The shadows of Lent are cast by the light of Easter.

But this is Ash Wednesday, and today we remember our sins— all the obstacles we place in the path of a life of grace. Scripture teaches that the universe and all that is in it was created good, and that a loving God continues to create, sustain and direct it. We human beings are created in the image of that God and all can respond to the love of God. At the same time, part of God’s love for us was to give us the freedom of will to choose, and more often than not we choose falsely.

Now why would we do that? Oh, a million reasons! Because we’re stubborn, willful children who want it all our way, mostly. We seek our own will rather than God’s will and we deny and distort our original intended relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation. The word for this distortion is sin. Do you know, there is no official doctrine of sin in the Bible, no one coherent, consistent teaching across the whole book and so theologians through the centuries have struggled to create one.

*This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing. Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.*

My preference is to say that sin is any action or thought that separates us from God.  
It is a self-centered spiral inward  
instead of a movement outward toward God, others, and creation.  
*My choice, my will, my way...to heck with you!*

Sin is real, but it is not our given nature, as I hope I have made clear;  
it is a universal condition—"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"—  
but it is primarily a self-chosen act.  
And to choose to separate ourselves from God definitely has consequences.  
"The wages of sin is death," Scripture says, meaning that when we sin  
we lose bits of our core selves, whittling away at our divine center more and more  
until nothing is left.  
The potential for sin insinuates itself into all human action, good as well as evil.  
It can be not only individual and private but also corporate and public.  
Institutions, governments, even the Church, can sin.  
And those who would deny the reality and power of sin,  
especially those who think that God doesn't see or doesn't care,  
couldn't be more wrong.

This is a pretty bleak admission.  
A day of darkness and gloom indeed.  
No wonder there are so few people here.  
That is, of course, unfortunate.  
Because lamentation is not all this day is about.  
If we gather to remind ourselves of our brokenness,  
to admit that we are not God  
and that our efforts to convince ourselves otherwise have not succeeded,  
to recognize the depth of our neediness,  
we also gather to proclaim God's mercy,  
God's kindness, God's total and utter forgiveness of those who repent.

The first line of the Collect for today sets the tone for this thought.  
"Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made."  
Nothing.  
God's love is for all creation—  
the beautiful parts, of course,  
but even its ugliness, striving for meaning.  
That means that all creation, ourselves included,  
is the recipient of God's unending and extravagant love.  
If we and the whole world could only believe this,  
the world would be a far better place.  
Gone would be our striving for power, acceptance, and attention.  
If only we could know that we were and are created for love's sake,  
peace might become a reality.  
Lent then, is about drawing us into that love,  
about realizing that we are in fact worth everything to God.

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Such then is the dual thrust of this day and what it is we do.  
We kneel and confess the depths of our brokenness,  
we beat our breast and cover our head with ashes.  
But God lifts us up, turns us around and embraces us,  
and there are tears of rejoicing in God's eyes.  
Two truths, juxtaposed side by side:  
our separation, God's grace.

And the sign of these truths  
is the cross that is marked on our foreheads.  
Tonight it is made in ashes,  
the stuff of our earthy, fallible humanity.  
Tonight we will leave here with this reminder  
emblazoned for all to see.  
Yet tomorrow, if not before, it will be washed away.  
This is a reminder of that other mark,  
given to us at baptism and made in oil,  
the anointing of the Holy Spirit who seals us as Christ's own.  
This, though invisible to others, remains with us forever.

Two truths, two sides of one reality.  
May we have the courage to face the one  
and the humility to accept the other.  
And may we never forget which truth—and which mark—is the stronger.

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