

Wednesday, February 14, 2018

Ash Wednesday

For the Sake of Christ!

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51:1-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b--6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Delivered to St. Stephen's Lutheran Church

1301 N. Broom St Wilmington DE 19806

Rev. Jason Churchill

20b We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

21 For our sake he made himself to be sin who knew no sin,
so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Many of you know that Paul and I would most likely not be the best of friends...and yet sometimes he has this uncanny ability to bring out some of the most beautiful and emotionally packed pieces of Scripture.

On behalf of Christ - the one that came and literally died for you - be reconciled to God. Turn back to God, and most of all live.

Ash Wednesday does not always give us the space to say "live."

We take on the full responsibility of our sins...the sins that committed Jesus to death on a cross...the sins that began with Adam and Eve eating the apple, from Cain killing Abel, and to the sins that we confessed both out loud and silently today.

We wear ash on our heads as an ancient sign of sorrow and repentance that dates back to even before Jesus Christ bent down and placed his hands in the dirt...the dust of the earth...to make mud or to write.

It is in that dust that we are reminded we shall return...but it is in that dust God implores to remember that it is from whence you came.

On behalf of Christ - be reconciled to God.

Paul who was known as Saul before his conversion, while the source of great suffering for the early followers of Christ...in fact the man that stood and witnessed silently the stoning of the one in whose name we bear...Stephen...nonetheless suffered greatly for the faith and for God.

Paul and the early Christians suffered afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, and hunger...all for the sake of Christ they reconciled themselves to God.

But their response to these sufferings can only be explained as out of this world. Their response most likely was seen just as absurd as it would be today.

They responded by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God.

Because of God - because of Jesus Christ the normal workings of this world have been turned upside down.

Paul goes on to say - in a piece of Scripture that usually finds me tearing up to explain how the world has and does and will change for those that reconcile themselves to God for the sake of Jesus Christ:

“We are treated as impostors, and yet are true;
 9as unknown, and yet are well known;
 as dying, and see—we are alive;
 as punished, and yet not killed;
 10as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing;
 as poor, yet making many rich;
 as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.”

Dying and living...

That is Ash Wednesday.

Poor and yet somehow making many rich...as having nothing yet possessing everything.

Dying and living...

T. S. Elliot said it best in his poem *Ash Wednesday* “This is the time of tension between dying and birth.”

Notice dying comes BEFORE birth.

The tension is in the death of the old you...the death of the man named Saul who abused...and the birth of the new you...the birth of Paul who suffered for the faith he once tried to destroy.

I do not find Ash Wednesday to be the funeral service for the liturgical year or for the church. Many of us do not find Lent to be a time of austerity or self-loathing...

Rather this is a time for us to recall the most fundamental realities that define who we are.

We are mortal.

We are from the dust of the earth.

In a few moments I will say to you the following words:

“Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

Recalling the story of creation when God knelt down and began to mold us from the dust of adamah, or the earth in Hebrew...the story when God created Adam...a clever play on the Hebrew word for Earth forever reminding us that our first ancestor was in fact of the earth...and like him, to that earth we will return.

There, somewhere in the dusty darkness of ash, we can find a bit of the absurdity of joy and life in the cross that saved and redeemed each and every single aspect of God’s creation. The idea that cross saved you and me.

I was reminded of how these dualities of our faith play into our every day.

Ann Warner wrote perhaps what I believe to be one of our most poignant and beautiful blogs simply called *Tears*.

She said: “They [tears] are a sign of sorrow, and anger, and fear, and frustration. They are a sign of joy, and fun, and sentimentality.”

The same can so easily be said about the ashes we all will be wearing shortly...

They too are signs of sorrow in the death of Christ.

In anger...perhaps anger at our own mortality or the mortality of those we love and have loved.

They are a sign of fear of an uncertain future and the frustration that goes along with our continual quest to be gods only to be met with reminders of our limitations.

But what if...what if the ash and oil on your forehead also reminds you of the fuller spectrum of human emotion and existence.

The joy...the joy of a faith that promises our salvation and eternity of glory.

The fun of being alive.

The sentimentality...the tenderness of the kiss of a loved one, the image of baby or child that remains imprinted on our minds...of love.

Because none of this could have ever happened without love. Love is the common tie between everything and everyone.

For the sake of Jesus Christ...reconcile yourself to God.

For the sake of this world and the sake of your own soul...let these ashes remind you to love in a way in which only your faith can explain.

May you find mercy, reconciliation, and love this Lenten season.