

Dust and Ashes Wednesday

2 Corinthians 5:11 – 6:13

The Passion of the Christ is a helpful movie to consider for Ash Wednesday and Lent. Nothing's pretty about it. Our faith isn't based on pretty. Every time I finish reading a gospel, I'm horrified with the beatings, the whippings, and the humiliation Jesus suffered. It's not pretty. It's real.

No matter what skeptics in the ancient or modern world might say, Christianity isn't a religion anyone would make up. Considering what Christianity originally meant (not the Christian faith's styrofoam substitute in America, promising that faith will make everyone healthy, wealthy, and wise), Christianity is about Jesus' dying a painful death for us and our life changed into his pattern, who'd make up that?

We humans always want life easy. Our affluent society today merely raises our desires further. Today, the pressures become greater for us to seek pleasure: the bigger, the better, the swankier. Even spiritual and religious marketing tries to sell us the religious equivalents of skydiving and bungee jumping: feeling good and getting our thrills. Our modern world, especially what's sold to us in the various media, is like a constant Mardi Gras. In the US, anymore, Mardi Gras, except for the calendar, has nothing to do with Lent. If someone on the night before Lent wants truly to celebrate something about Jesus, it wouldn't be Mardi Gras.

Lent isn't supposed to be a "funny ha-ha" time. Nothing will glorify God if we're morbid; but our faith isn't a religious Disneyland, either. Time must come — call it Lent, or a retreat, or a reassessment — when we become serious about our faith. Time must come, so why not now, as Paul writes in verse 2, "now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation"? Our seriousness about faith comes about because of Jesus' life and death for us. We might desire ease, but Jesus bestows upon us courage to live for him. We might want congratulations or at least recognition and thanks for our serving. Jesus grants us his example, his love, and his Spirit.

Our world's view of importance is summed up in the question, "If you're so smart, how come you ain't rich?" Apply that to Jesus as well as to Paul, the apostle. They weren't rich. Paul makes a point of stating Jesus' poverty on our behalf and mentioning his own poverty for the sake of his fellow Christians. In the middle of this second letter to the church at Corinth, Greece, Paul relates how others view him, yet how he really is: "as having nothing, and yet possessing everything."

Paul presents two views of himself and his small group of Christian missionaries. One view is how non-Christians see them and the other is from the perspective of the Christian faith: "poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, yet possessing everything." He shows the human opinion and the divine. He relates the worldly assessment of the Christian faith and the eternal one. He expresses the great mystery that Christians are considered as dying; yet we are alive. That's our central belief: Dying doesn't end our faith or our lives. That's what Jesus' last week in Jerusalem is about and what we concentrate upon in Lent.

Lent should make us serious about our faith but not about ourselves. I'll invite you at the end of the service to come forward to receive a cross of ashes on your forehead. I'll speak the ancient words to you, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." We remember that we're assembled from the handful of elements that makes up all of life. If we view humans within the entire sphere of earthly life, except for our brain, there's not much distinctive about us. Our bodies harness the energy of a lot of carbon compounds. Wring the water from us, however, and we're not too different from dust and ashes. Dust like you battle when you're cultivating a field on a windy day or like you breathe as you fight the wind on Main Street in late winter. Ashes like the breeze always seems to spiral around the campfire and into your eyes or like the ashes that remain after you're cremated.

It's how we started. It's how we'll end. We start as basic elements, and we end that way. Dust and ashes at the two extremes of our life, and at our beginning and our ending we're helpless. The helplessness of birth and the

helplessness of death: We live between those two moments of helplessness; yet right here we're summoned to be faithful.

Our faith heads us toward an early morning's discovery in a garden outside Jerusalem's old walls. Jesus was covered with bruises, blood, and dust on a Friday afternoon, but by Sunday morning he could pass through locked doors, appear, and disappear, and grant his presence and the grace of eternal life to any who respond to him. That's whom we follow, whom we obey, whom we trust, whom we emulate: Our risen Lord Jesus who still has holes in his hands and side.

The world around us is a constant Mardi Gras parade. But we Christians have our own parade that leads us through this life from beginning to end, from God and to God. We follow Jesus. He started as a helpless infant all bloody and rubbery, like the rest of us, yet born and cared for within God's purpose and promise. So, also, his death was truly bloody, and none of us, no matter what war we've experienced, disasters we've survived, or violent video games we've played, would want to watch what happened to him in his torture. And friends, no matter what some well-meaning person might have told you, Jesus was dead. Soldiers in the Roman legions knew death. The squad of four that guarded Jesus as he died would have been killed if he wasn't truly dead.

Jesus was dead. Jesus was as dead as Paul was poor. Yet, as Jesus' death isn't the last word, neither is Paul's poverty. We live by the faith that God has made us, and loves us, and that, even though we might be constituted of the same elements as any other DNA-controlled organism, we're also made out of the same dust as the stars. The same God who swirled the vast universe of cosmic dust into suns, planets, and moons also created our earth and our bodies. We are that important, that valuable, that worthwhile to God, and through Jesus we belong to the God of the universe whether we live or die. Made of dust, yes, but also from the same stuff as stars and with a destiny beyond this world.

In Lent, we face the brevity of our life and our impending death and also, we encounter the great dignity and destiny God created for us. In Lent, we're allowed and encouraged to study under the apostle Paul and to imitate his service by giving more of our time and possessions to help others. In Lent, we're invited and commanded to follow God's Son and to replicate his pattern of sacrifice for others. Paul says we are dying; yet we live. Jesus promises, "Because I live, you shall live, also."

Starting in Lent, if we haven't before, let's be serious about God and what God says about life. Let's not be over serious about ourselves. We'll let Jesus be concerned about us. We'll celebrate our earthly beginning and our heavenly goal by being humble, grateful, and obedient. Amen.