

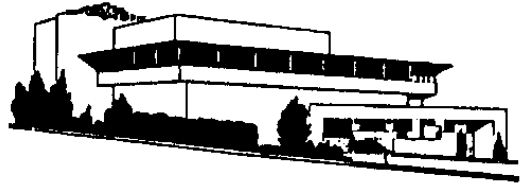
From the Community Pulpit “Humble Ashes and Crazy Hope”

Text: Genesis 18:26-27 and Romans 5:1-5

Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

Ash Wednesday, February 25, 2009

7:00 am, 12 Noon, & 7:00 pm (Chapel)



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Genesis 18:26-27 – 26 And the Lord said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake." 27 Abraham answered, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes.

Romans 5:1-5 – 1 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. 3 And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

I. Happy (?) Ash Wednesday

Ever since I came to Kansas City, Ash Wednesday has been a special moment for me. Chalk it up to a Protestant coming late to what Catholics have known for centuries about liturgy, drama, color, and ritual. (As I say to my Catholic friends, "Why should you guys have all the fun?") Or say that it's a fascination with this very obvious, public expression of one's faith. Or, perhaps, one could wonder, it is an attempt to express at least a portion of what Christians believe about their faith – namely, that it's OK to openly, straightforwardly announce that one is a Christian.

However it came to pass, this allure that Ash Wednesday poses for me has only intensified since I came to Community.

And, for some odd reason, Ash Wednesday has also been – consistently, insistently, persistently – a day of odd greetings. What I mean is that, on Ash Wednesday, more often than not, I hear myself offering the greeting "Happy Ash Wednesday." And I do so with clear sincerity and unabashed ignorance regarding the incongruity between the statement "Happy Ash Wednesday!" and the solemnity with which Ash Wednesday is observed. At times I wonder if I come off like legendary gunfighter

Kid Shelleen in the movie *Cat Ballou*. At one point in the story line Kid enters into a funeral scene so drunk that, when he sees a coffin and some candles, he mistakes the occasion for a birthday and begins singing, drunken slurs and all, "Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday to you...." And I say "Happy Ash Wednesday." Whew!

II. Humble Ashes

People didn't start out singing and happily greeting each other in the first observances of Ash Wednesday 1700 years ago. For Christians the use of ashes was practiced in association with the public display of penance by at least the fourth century after Christ's birth. Then the practice faded away. By the eleventh century the use of ashes had come to be connected with the beginning of the Lenten season and its preparations for the celebrations coming at Easter.¹

The use of ashes in Christian worship was patterned, of course, after the Jewish practice of donning sackcloth and marking oneself with ashes in order to show repentance and mourning.²

Remember how Mordecai's mourning in sackcloth and ashes moves Queen Esther deeply, thereafter she agrees to help out the Jews in Persia.

Job is the most famous person to sit in an ash-heap, as he did mourning his ceaseless losses and endless streak of bad fortune. At the beginning of the book that bears his name the narrator says Job "sat among the ashes."³ In the midst of his harrowing struggle against the evil cast against him, Job says, "[God] has cast

me into the mire, and I have become like ... ashes." ⁴
And then toward the end of his incredible ordeal he says *"I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."* ⁵

Job is actually quoting the oldest Biblical reference to ashes, Abraham's. In a match of wits with God, Abraham bargains with God in order to save the city of Sodom from utter destruction. God's original deal is plain. If Abraham can find fifty righteous men, then God will not destroy Sodom. Abraham whittles down the deal to a requirement of only ten righteous men. And he does so, by an appeal to his humble status, pointing out to God that *"I ... am but dust and ashes."* ⁶

In this phrase we get to the point of the use of ashes by the Hebrew people and by Christians. It's all about humility.

Ashes of any kind are humbling. Look at a campfire, the morning after it has warmed and charmed a gathering of campers, and, no matter how high the flames licked the sky the night before, the embers and ashes smoldering in the daylight are indeed a humble residue.

Look at the devastation in Australia and California with their raging wildfires decimating thousands and thousands of acres of countryside and residential areas. The sight is harrowing. All that's left? Humble ashes.

And even in something like palm crosses, branches, and fronds gathered over the last 20 years of Ash Wednesdays here at Community, as they's rendered into these three small bowls of ashes, this is true. On Monday when we gathered the left-over palm fronds, palm branches, and palm crosses which you had brought in from last year's Palm Sunday processions, they initially amounted to about two, maybe three grocery sacks full. And what happened to them, once a match was set to them? Less than a mere handful of ashes. Humble ashes.

Ash Wednesday, in other words is all about humility. Not denigration and self-abasement. No, the world does enough of that to us that we

don't need to do it to ourselves. Rather Ash Wednesday is a time to echo Abraham's humble approach to God. *"I am,... we are ... but dust and ashes."* We know our connection with the majesty and the glory and the power of God. And in the face of the those overwhelming experiences we can never claim superiority or preeminence. Human beings are fragile creatures and need to treat one another that way. Humble ashes.

This is the kind of humility which New Yorkers shared on the island of Manhattan, on September 11, 2001, as they raced from the financial district, covered with ashes, wrought by the destruction of the World Trade Center's twin towers, humbled by their and our vulnerability, made one in suffering and ennobled by their similarly ash-covered faces. All divisive distinctions were covered with ashes. All manner of fear and hesitation about the differences that keep people distant from one another was made irrelevant by the commonality of their ashy countenances. Humble, humbling ashes.

Humility is what Ash Wednesday and Lent, and eventually Easter are all about. None of us are as invincible as we once thought we were. Thus, it behooves us to act with appropriate humility to care for one another and for ourselves, and to care for the entire planet and everyone on it. To be sure, the Psalmist is absolutely on target when he says, *"We are fearfully and wonderfully made,"* ⁷ But the Psalmist is also right when he reminds us that God has made us *"little lower than the angels."* ⁸ Even if you are fashioned in the image of God, if you are not God, humility is the order of the day.

I got to see what was for me at the time the embodiment of humility when I met Dom Helder Camara, the Bishop of Brazil, at a General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in St. Louis. The good bishop stood about 5 feet vertical, if that tall. Dressed in a full-length cassock robe, he

seemed to levitate – like Yoda might levitate – when he passed across a room or walked down a sidewalk. At that General Assembly which had gone to great lengths of trouble to get him to St. Louis, this man who was hunted and targeted for assassination some said, because of his work for the oppressed of South America, this man who said, *“When I feed the poor they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they called me a communist”* – this little elfin figure had a constant twinkle in his eye and, like all saintly folks I’ve ever met, no little mischief in him. When I got to shake his hand and say how much I appreciated his sermon at the General Assembly and expressed my admiration for his work, there was more than the normal deflection of a compliment. When I offered my high praise, he laughed, chortled actually, and shook his head. The declaration in his eyes and the communication of his overall demeanor were obvious: *“I am but dust and ashes. I simply do my part, like you do your part. And the quicker we figure that out about ourselves, the better off we and the world will be.”*

III. Crazy Hope

But there’s another angle on Ash Wednesday and the mark we will put on our foreheads that needs illuminating. In addition to Humility, Ash Wednesday is all about Hope.

The book of Hebrews say that *“Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”*⁹ If Christian faith is worthy of anything, it’s worth investing our best hopes and dreams and convictions into our daily practices. The 40 day journey of Lent is all about hope – from Ash Wednesday’s smudge upon our foreheads to the brush of yellow pistils of the Easter lilies upon our arms when we embrace them on Resurrection Sunday.

Now this hope is actually *crazy hope*. What else could we call it in a world like ours? Paul admits as much when he describes the suffering of the church in Rome: *“... we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not*

*disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”*¹⁰ It’s as if Paul is saying, “Just as you might put a dab of ashes on your foreheads to remind you of the call to humility, God is pouring a heaping portion of hope-filled love into your hearts.” This is truly crazy.

Now let me explain a bit here. There’s good crazy and there’s bad crazy.¹¹

Yesterday, American Century had their annual recognition celebration here at Community. All of the employees came over from the towers up at 45th and Main and some came in from around the country for the occasion. They settled into the comfortable confines of our sanctuary for a review of their year’s work. As you can imagine, recent months have not provided them rip-roaring happy times. When I asked my friend Larry Pfaustch about the percentage of the company’s losses, he said “About 40% from what it was a year ago.” And even though that’s better than most of the stock market has done, it’s been devastating to so many, many people, including American Century employees. Still on this particular day, there was something else in the air. In the wake of being utterly humbled by a ravaged economy, something else permeated the gathering. There were nominations from various American Century work groups and many accolades about award winners for performance and achievement over the past year. Top award winners were also announced. There was a stunning video that told the story of Jim and Virginia Stowers and the legacy of hard work they had bequeathed to all of the American Century team. What was amazing was how together and hopeful, actually joyful the whole gathering was. Each award winner was, at once, jubilant and humbled by their awards. And Mr. And Mrs. Stowers stuck around and greeted every employee who wanted to shake their hands. It was the craziest thing I’d ever witnessed in a business setting. It looked a lot

like the good crazy hope that Ash Wednesday is all about.

So allow me to heighten the distinction. There's good crazy and bad crazy.

A man erases the lives of his entire family with gun violence and then turns the gun on himself. That's bad crazy.

Mother Theresa salving the festering wounds of poor untouchables in Calcutta. That's good crazy.

Terrorists blasting away in the middle of Muslim high holy days in Mosul. Bad crazy.

Firefighters plunging into burning buildings time after time. Good crazy.

Mr. Madoff, bilking countless persons out their life savings – rich and middle income alike. Bad crazy. A truly nondiscriminating bad crazy.

Warren Buffet giving 50 billion dollars of his fortune to the Gates Foundation for the benefit of the world. Good crazy.

Fred Phelps and his family yelling epithets at grieving folks at the gravesides of family members who fell in the war-torn provinces of Iraq– bad crazy.

A cancer patient collecting a rainbow array of new hats to celebrate her new “do” (or lack thereof). Good crazy.

The decimation of our public school systems over the past two generations. Bad crazy.

The hard daily work of teachers and community groups who believe school systems can change for the better. Good crazy.

And – if I may make a plug for our new worship service coming up on March 8th – thinking that traditional ways of worship will always touch and connect with every forthcoming generation. Bad crazy. (Or at least not-very-good crazy.)

Tom Haley and Melissa St. Clair and Kevin Snow and Donna Mueller and yours truly and the team putting together the new 9:20 a.m. worship service, not really knowing exactly what we're doing, especially when it comes to

technology. Good crazy!

The world thinking that it could kill God, so they put Jesus up on a cross on a shadow-filled Friday. Bad crazy.

Jesus bolting out of the tomb on a brightly lit Easter Sunday. Good crazy.

The betrayal and abandonment of the apostles in Jesus' hour of need. Bad crazy.

Jesus' entrusting the legacy of his love and his reconciling ministry to his fallen-away disciples. Good crazy.

Hope is crazy. It's good crazy. Manifested in Jesus Christ and granted unto us. Symbolized today by an ashy smudge on our foreheads. Crazy like the way God is crazy– to dream of a world like ours being worthy of redemption. Crazy like Christ was crazy – to love and abide with us, as he said he would, “to the end of the age.”

So, when someone asks me, when someone asks you, “What's all this stuff about Ash Wednesday?,” I suggest we offer at least one of two responses.

(1) It's all about humility.

(2) It's all about hope, and a crazy hope at that.

Or we could provide a combo response: “It's about humility and hope, but I can't actually recall which one comes first!”

Let's have a great Lent, a Lent that's full of humility and hope, crazy hope, good crazy hope for us all. Let it be so. AMEN.

NOTES

- 1 Richard P. McBrien, Gen. Ed. *The Harper Collins Encyclopedia of Catholicism* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995), pp. 100-101.
- 2 Paul J. Achtemeier, Gen. Ed., *Harpers Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1985), p. 75.
- 3 Job 2:8 .
- 4 Job 30:19.
- 5 Job 42:6.
- 6 Genesis 18:27.
- 7 Psalm 139:14.
- 8 Psalm 8: 5.
- 9 Hebrews 12:1.
- 10 Romans 5:3-5.
- 11 I heard the “good crazy-bad crazy” dichotomy first from Dr. Joseph Lowery at St. Paul School of Theology, Kansas City, MO, Feb. 17, 2009. The application to the theme of hope is completely mine, for good or ill.