

From the Community Pulpit

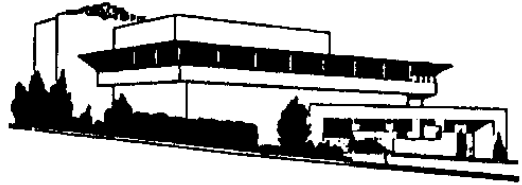
"I and Thou"

Text: Psalm 8

Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2009

7:00 am , 12 Noon, & 6:00 pm (Chapel)



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Psalm 8

1 O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth! Thou whose glory above the heavens is chanted
2 by the mouth of babes and infants, thou hast founded a bulwark because of thy foes, to still the enemy and the avenger.
3 When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established;
4 what is humanity that thou art mindful of us, and the children of humanity that thou dost care for us?
5 Yet thou hast made us little lower than the angels, and dost crown us with glory and honor.
6 Thou hast given us dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under our feet,
7 all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,
8 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the sea.
9 O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth!

I. Welcome! Welcome to an Affirming Ash Wednesday Service!

If this is your first visit here at 4601 Main Street and you're unfamiliar with a Community Christian Church version of Ash Wednesday, let me assure you that you're in for a treat. This service is a gift for you, one which, we hope, will "keep on giving" in your life.

If this is your umpteenth time to cross the threshold, if you've returned once more for your annual smudge of ashes on your forehead, then welcome home! We're glad to see you! There's a warm and comfortable gift prepared just for you, too.

We're glad to see everyone here in Community's Bonfils Chapel. We're glad to offer an affirming Ash Wednesday service to one and all.

For too many folks - those who were misused (and occasionally abused) by previously negative religious experiences- Ash Wednesday may represent something they'd simply prefer to forget or avoid: guilt, negativity and failure. That's not the purpose

of Ash Wednesday at all.

There are other folks who regard most religious ritual as hocus pocus, who've maintained a safe distance from anything even remotely resembling religious faith because so much religious language has seemed to them like mumbo-jumbo. Some of you may have been insulted by some religionist somewhere who asked you to will your own schizophrenia and abandon your sense of reason. If you are in any of these camps, this service is definitely for you.

Ash Wednesday is the beginning of a great adventure called Lent. During this season that stretches from today's goodness to the glorious rise of Easter Sunday, there's a heightened sense of spiritual urgency and quickened appreciation of life's precious character.

At Community during this season - coinciding with the lengthening of our spring-time days, thus its name "Lent" - instead of stressing the twisted, stereotypical aspects of overwrought repentance, abject sorrow, and an overbearing kind of piety that disallows our full humanness, we stress the positive aspects of deepened prayer, glad and joyful worship, closer connections with God and neighbor. These are the dynamics that lengthen the quality of our lives along with their duration.

So, welcome! And may your Lenten journey be a joyful, glad, and fulfilling experience.

Out text for today's service is a major affirmation of our human-ness, in all of its

grit and grandeur:

"When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established; what is humanity that thou art mindful of us, what are the children of humanity that thou dost care for us? Yet thou hast made us little lower than the angels, and dost crown us with glory and honor." (Psalm 8)

In this text we see the dichotomy, the sacred tension in which we live. The text, in various translations, says we have been created *"a little lower than the angels."*

II. A Little Lower

A little lower. That pretty much sums it up fairly well, doesn't it?

When we know the crime statistics of our city, or any major city in America, human beings can certainly be described as *"a little lower"*

When we consider the crass expressions of some radio talk-show programs and the crude critiques that so-called media gurus apply to our political situations, we can easily say we are *"a little lower"*

Those who are older, who daily behold the creeks, the cranks, and the crevices in their bodies (and their personalities), can quickly confess that they are *"a little lower"*

Those who are younger, who know their lack of experience and the frustration that sometimes ensues in their lives, can also say that they are *"a little lower"*

When we acknowledge the undeniable realities of the human predicament, which we can cite in every community, in every culture, in every country on the face of the globe, again and again and again – war, greed, enmity, recklessness, drunk-driving, child abuse – we must describe ourselves as *"a little lower than the angels."*

But, before I lose my perspective and deny what I said about the affirming character and tone of today's service, let us

also attend to the latter half of the phrase. Remember that Psalm 8 praises God's wondrous ways by stressing that we have been made *"a little lower than the angels."*

III. ... than the Angels

Now, the evidence for the overall angelic tendencies of human existence is so very real and so very obvious when we have eyes to see and ears to hear and souls to receive such good news.

Listen to Beethoven's *"Ode to Joy,"* or k.d. lang singing Leonard Cohen's *"Hallelujah"* during the opening ceremonies of the Winter Olympics or Louis Armstrong singing *"What a Wonderful World"* or Millie Edwards singing *"If I Had My Way"* or the Chancel Choir singing *"River of Judea,"* and who wouldn't think of *"... angel"?!*

Your daughter dances in her first recital, with grace and a tremendous smile on her face, and what else would you say but *"angel"?* Your son becomes an Eagle Scout, and, beyond all his blemishes and bungling, you say, quietly or loudly, *"angel."*

The agility of Doc Watson on a guitar, *"angel."* The musical enthusiasm of Scott Presnell, Gary Tannen, Nathan Kent, Davis Shafer and Elizabeth Van Horn in our Journey music team, *"angels."*

The blessedness of home-made chicken soup, *"angel."* A Valentine made by a creative four-year-old, *"angel."*

The warmth of a grandparent's generous lap, *"angel."* The capacity to call a cease-fire in the midst of conflict, *"angel."*

Help in Haiti, *"angel."* Artistic expression in all of its forms, *"angels."*

The ability to care for a child who is sick, a teenager who is struggling, a young parent who is sleepless, a middle-aged friend who is floundering, an elderly parent who is moving into twilight, *"angel," "angel," "angel," "angel," "angel."* Angels, indeed. Angels, all!

Oh yes, we can easily say “a little lower...” but we must emphasize “... than the angels.”

The trick, of course, is the emphasis, isn't it? How do we maintain a proper emphasis on the “angel” side rather than the “little lower” side? In the face of all of the forces which would persuade us that we are only “a little lower,” how can we strike a saving balance and know, with consistency, the “angel” side to which our character aspires?

I'm glad you've asked those questions!

IV. *I and Thou*

The way to a proper emphasis and a disciplined, saving balance can be found in Martin Buber's genius insight.

Buber was one of the intellectual and spiritual giants of the 20th century, a philosopher, theologian and popularizer of the Hasidic movement within Judaism. By the time he was fourteen, he was multilingual, conversant in five languages, Yiddish and German (at home), Hebrew and French (during his childhood), Polish (at secondary school).

He was born and grew up in Vienna but lived most of his early adult years in Germany. When the Nazis seized power in Germany in 1933, he immediately resigned his professorship at the University of Frankfurt, left Germany, and assumed a professorship at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. There he would participate in the discussion of Jewish- Palestinian relations and was member of group which aimed at a bi-national state.

His greatest work, is, arguably, a book entitled of *Ich und Du*, translated as *I and Thou*. In this book, and throughout his exemplary life, he stressed the I-Thou relationship as the ultimate expression and fulfillment of what it means to be truly human before God and in community with others. Rather than an I-It relationship, Buber

would remind us, we possess the capacity to maintain an I-Thou relationship with God and our neighbors. In essence he struck a chord with what Christianity is all about: God as a person. He said, “*The description of God as a Person is indispensable for everyone who like myself means by ‘God’ not a principle... and not an idea... but rather... who – whatever else he may be – enters into a direct relation with us ... in creative, revealing, and redeeming acts, and thus makes it possible for us to enter into a direct relation with him.*”¹

Buber believed that such a way of relating could be extended to all aspects of life, including the natural world. He was so sure of the I-Thou dimensions of life that he believed he could even enter into an “I-Thou” relationship with his cat!²

Now, whether or not you have a cat to cuddle in your household, such an attitude and posture toward life can be achieved with God and our neighbors.

During this year's Lenten journey toward the good news of Christ's resurrection (and our own!), I encourage you to grow deeper into an “I-Thou” relationship with God. Such an attitude and orientation, according to scripture, tradition, reason and our collective experience, is how God desires to relate to us.

Such an attitude and orientation is the most intimate form of human connection. As Burris Jenkins, one of Community's great heroes, used to say (quoting Joseph Swain's hymn “*How Sweet, How Heavenly is the Sight*”): “*We know each other, for we have drunk the cup of life together, Where sorrow flows from eye to eye, and joy from heart to heart.*”

I encourage us all to maintain an “I-Thou” attitude and orientation toward God, toward one another within our cherished fellowship of faith, and toward everyone we meet throughout this Lenten season, and indeed, throughout all of our lives. As we experience and enjoy the tremendous

opportunities for growth and deepening coming up – ... Kerygma Bible Study ... the new “Breaking Bread- Building Community” class led by Rev. Ed Stevenson ... the new IMAGO DEI sermon series, the Pastor’s Class ... the Young Adults’ bowling outing ... at Chancel Choir practices and Bell Choir practices... during Journey Music team rehearsals ... at Monday-Night-at-Micah-Ministries... the Young Adults– Artists Helping the Homeless... in special gatherings like the C.O.L.O.R.s’ outing to see the play *Broke-ology* at the Copaken Theater... in ongoing group occasions like Sunday School classes... Youth group meetings... Young Families dinners... at dinner with Congressman Emanuel Cleaver ... at the C.O.L.O.R.s’ dinner with Gary Jenkins and our friends from Swope Parkway United Christian Church ... welcoming the Culver-Stockton College Choir into our homes and our sanctuary... the Irish Fest ... Wednesday lunches after midday-midweek worship ... coffee fellowship on Sundays, ... and, of course, always in the spiritually nourishing and welcoming Lord’s Supper moments we share with one another on Wednesday evenings and Sunday mornings – I encourage us to maintain an “I-Thou” attitude and orientation. If we will do so, as consistently as we can, with as much joy as we are capable of, we will see, moment by moment and day by day, how the Psalmist was so very right in describing us as *“little lower than the angels”!*

As you come forward for the time-honored and ever new and inspirational “Imposition of Ashes,” receive the cross-shaped smudge as a reminder that you are *“little lower”* but *“a little lower than the angels.”* AMEN.

NOTES

- 1 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, Second Edition, (New York: Scribner’s & Sons, 1958), p. 135.
- 2 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, pp. 96-97.

Ash Wednesday – Pastoral Prayer

by Rev. Melissa St. Clair

We give you thanks, O God,
for you are good.

Your steadfast love endures forever.
When we push so hard that we find
ourselves falling,
you help us.

You are our strength and our might.
As we begin again this year our Lenten
journey – 40 days of reflection and reveling
in the ultimate love you have for humanity –
make us ready to open our lives to you,
recalling and experiencing anew the freedom
and grace we find in you through your Son,
our Savior through whom our lives are filled
with the breath of the Spirit.

Today, as we feel the mark of the cross,
smell the earthiness of the charred palms,
and see the smudge of ashes,
might we be reminded of the cross of life to
which we are called.

From dust we came and to dust we will
return, yet while we are here,
our lives have been gifted by you with the
potential to make life for all your people
fuller and more meaningful.

Bless each one whose names we hold in
prayer today;

 bless each one whose needs are not
 known to us but are clear to you;
 and bless each one of us and keep us
 all of our days.

In the name of the Christ, who lived his life
to its fullest, we pray.

Amen.

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