

“Ashes to Ashes, Heart to Heart”

Text: 1 Peter 2:9-10

Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

Ash Wednesday, March 9, 2011

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

◆◆◆ Community Christian Church ◆◆◆ 4601 Main◆◆◆ Kansas City, Missouri ◆◆◆ 64112 ◆◆◆

The season of Lent is an enriching stretch of time – from today, March 9, all the way to April 24, Easter Sunday – during which we’re invited to deepen our faith and broaden our spirits. It’s chock full of refreshing activities and interesting rituals and intriguing study occasions. Just as Advent prepares us for the splendor of Christmas, Lent prepares us for the glory of Easter.

And it all starts with the mark of ashes and a plain, straightforward statement: *“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”* Such simple words, such a profound message. Now many if not most of Community’s family of faith treasure Ash Wednesday and the marking of holy time it signifies. Countless Christians welcome the seven weeks of Lent as a blessing for their faith. Prayer becomes deeper. Worship becomes more energized. The life of the Spirit takes center stage.

But there are some folks elsewhere – friends of yours and mine – who don’t enjoy Lent and don’t appreciate Ash Wednesday very much. I have some Protestant friends who cede Lent to Catholic Christians and can’t understand why any Protestants should take after the practices of their Catholic forebears.

We all have other friends who – Protestant and Catholics and an array of curmudgeonly non-religious friends – who cast a caustic eye at Lent and consider it simply a guilt-relief machine: put in your penance for seven weeks, pull the lever of spiritual practices, and – voila! – you hit the jackpot of forgiveness. To

this same curmudgeonly crowd, if you don't deposit the coin of your penance, then Lent becomes a guilt-*producing* mechanism.

Still other friends simply may not appreciate anyone, even a minister, imposing a smudge on their foreheads. "It's not seemly," these friends say, "obviously messy, and definitely disturbing to one's normal appearance."

Despite all these objections to Lent and Ash Wednesday, I love them both. Though I didn't grow up with much of an emphasis on the season of Lent or the day which launches it, Lent and Ash Wednesday have become – how should I put this? – precious to me.

I think this is so because of the simplicity of faith which Lent calls us to embody in our daily lives. And with regard to Ash Wednesday's emphasis of the simplicity of faith, it seems so right to quote Arthur Ashe: "*Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can.*"

I have joined others in relishing the richness of Lent, also, because it never disappoints. Each year we have observed the Lenten season here at Community, blessings have poured forth: youth claim Christ's path as their way of life; young adults learn the advantages of prayer; senior adults come alive like spring flowers in the desert; those who never knew that a life of intimate connection with God was ever possible find that it's wonderfully, even occasionally stupefyingly possible.

So here we are, and Arthur Ashe is exactly right: "*Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can.*"

Where we start is dusty and ashy and earthy. It is a humbling moment where we are. It's humbling to note that though our bodies might be made up of 93% water, we all become dust one day. The ancient refrain is remind us to remember that we are dust.

But let us also recognize that we are magnificent dust! We are made of the very stuff of creation. We consist of the essential elements with which the world began. Scientists and poets alike tell us that the bio-chemical makeup reaches back to time's beginnings. Four and a half billion years ago, when the chronos of earthly time commenced and God said "Let there be light," the magnificent dust of God's creation was brought forth into being. Ever since then, elements have been building up and moving around, dispersing and carrying on, eon to eon to eon. From one generation to the next, the stuff of which we are made has been transformed from one person to the next. Ashes to ashes, indeed.

Compound the mysterious, wondrous journey of the ashes with the additional knowledge that the substance of the plants and the earth from which they emanate know no diminution. That is, all matter is bequeathed from previous matter, reaching all the way back to the earth's primordial beginnings. Meaning? Ultimately, finally the ashes we receive on our foreheads today connect us with all other followers of Jesus in all previous times.

It goes like this. The ashes used in today's service also have origins that are magnificent and treasurable. Just think of it: They not only come from the palm fronds and palm crosses of the previous twenty years here at Community. The ashes that touched the first forehead of the very first participant in the first observance of Ash Wednesday were eventually rubbed or washed away, falling into the confluence of a river that then deposited its residue into a silty plain. Or the ashy residue was borne by the winds to a farm a thousand miles away. In any case, perhaps we can say in all cases, the ashes from previous millennia then nourished the plants that then became the palm branches that then were cut and fashioned into palm crosses for more Palm Sunday celebrations, decade after decade, century after century, to this very day. ¹

Well-traveled, treasurable, magnificent dust indeed. Ashes to ashes, and, given their history from one penitent's forehead to another, heart to heart.

The epistle of I Peter had another way of putting this great claim about our magnificent dust: *"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. In order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; one you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."*²

Where we are, and what we have at our disposal to use, and what we can do are all tied up in this simple, humble ritual with its powerful symbolic message. Hear now the traditional phrasing for Ash Wednesday with a new nuance: *"Remember that you are magnificent, holy, divinely touched dust and to such magnificent, holy dust you shall return."*

Today, in the Imposition of Ashes, we are receiving a wondrous, mysterious sign, one might even say "God's fingerprint".

And the fingerprint's meaning? We are broadcasting to the world a very simple proclamation: we are claimed by God as God's beloved ones.

A month ago, my friend David Shirey, pastor of Coolwater Christian Church in Cave Creek, Arizona, reminded me of a portion of Matthew's gospel that reveals just what is going on today in our Ash Wednesday ritual.

The third chapter of Matthew depicts Jesus' baptism. As Jesus rises dripping from the waters of the Jordan, freshly baptized by the hand of his cousin John, a voice speaks from the heavenly realm: *"This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."*³

His direction is clear. His path has been revealed. His destiny is assured. Jesus is God's beloved Son. His ministry will really be not so much about what he does as much as about who he is: God's beloved Son.

Two short verses later, Jesus is in the desert wilderness enduring the temptations of the Satanic One. And the first utterance of the tempter in the gospel of Matthew, and, of course, in the entire New Testament, is a question: *“If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread.”*⁴ This is more than a mere appeal to physical gratification. It is more than a sneering query meant to ensnare Jesus in the performance of magic.

“If...,” the tempter says. It is a doubt-saturated rhetorical question. “If...” It is a profound attack on God’s blessing.

We know the tempting, debilitating power of such an “If,” and how culture and the powers and principalities seek to constrain us and qualify us for special status.

- “If you’re really smart, you’ll choose this career path and thus be valuable and worthy.”
- “If you’re really a person of importance and prestige, then you’ll wear this perfume, drive this car, drink this beer....”
- “If you’re really a super-duper world power, if you are really the shot-caller of the globe, then you’ll transform these pieces of bread for the poor into the stony implements of military weaponry.”
- “If you’re really a true patriot, then surely you can only vote for one candidate.”
- “If you’re really a Christian, then you’ll express your beliefs in only one way.”

Jesus resisted the debilitating power of such an “If.” He didn’t yield to any doubting about the One who had blessed him and Whose he was. He didn’t need to perform any fantastic feat to prove he was God’s beloved Son. He rested comfortably and trusted unflinchingly in the status conferred upon him by God.

And the truth about Jesus is the same truth about you and me. God declares us to be beloved – *“once you were no people, but now you are God’s people, once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”* We are beloved and made so - undeniably, unerasably, irrevocably – by God’s blessing upon our lives. No malevolence can stunt it. No satanic force can erase it. No tempter can ever take it away. We are God’s.

The message of the ashy smudge we receive today on Ash Wednesday? Two meanings which are eternally true: You are made of magnificent dust and you are God’s beloved. No ifs, and’s or but’s about it.

I urge you to claim your magnificence this Lenten season. Throughout your prayer times and worship and study gatherings and service activities along the Lenten journey, remember the phrase *“ashes to ashes and heart to heart”* allow yourself to be transformed by God’s defining declaration: You are beloved. Let none us ever forget that God’s blessing can never be taken away. AMEN.

NOTES

- 1 The initial inspiration for this sermon came from my friend Bill Tammeus and his Facebook posting from February 17, 2010, when he wrote, *“As I get ashes on my forehead this evening at church I hope to remember to think about the fact that for millions and millions of years the molecules making up the ashes have been spinning about the cosmos. Maybe once before they were in Ash Wednesday ashes, and thus have gone from ashes to ashes.”*
- 2 I Peter 2:9-10.
- 3 Matthew 3:17.
- 4 Matthew 4:3.