

Ash Wednesday was not incorporated into our worship until about the 6th century it is a day of the prophets we might say.... Repent, repent and return, or in the language of the way of love, Turn. Turn, pray, worship and Go.

One of my favorite quotes from Bonhoeffer is ‘anyone who does not cry out for the Jews has no right to sing pious chants in church’.

Matthew, Joel, Isaiah and the other prophets focus on this same message to the spiritual community of their time. The Hebrew people certainly believed they were on the right path that they were following the will of God, faithful in the practice, and they were quite certain that this what God wanted.

They attend services frequently, followed their lectionary, prayed out loud, and make a fuss about the good works that they had done so that everyone can see them.

The problem according to the prophets that spoke on God’s behalf, is that God does not really care all that much about their piety, their sacrifice’s, their chants or incense. What the creator really cares about is how well we love one another and care for each other.

From the first chapter of Isaiah

When you come to appear before me,

who asked this from you,

this trampling of my temple’s courts?

Stop bringing worthless offerings.

Your incense repulses me.

New moon, sabbath, and the calling of an assembly—

I can't stand wickedness with celebration!

I hate your new moons and your festivals.

They've become a burden that I'm tired of bearing.

When you extend your hands,

I'll hide my eyes from you.

Even when you pray for a long time, I won't listen.

Your hands are stained with blood.

Wash! Be clean!

Remove your ugly deeds from my sight.

Put an end to such evil;

The Hebrew people were continuously fighting with each other, oppressing their workers, fighting with their neighbors, they were not caring for the orphan, the refugee, the poor and the widow. Their context is certainly not so different than our own.

We understand through the prophets, and Jesus that what God cares about is how we live together, how we love our enemies, and protect the innocent, how we take care of our planet, how we treat each other. God cares about mercy and love, we should imbed the words of Micah in our hearts, 'what does God require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God'.

or, as Isaiah proclaims...

learn to do good.

Seek justice: help the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow.

The Gospel of Matthew repeats these prophetic themes as we heard in today's reading, mirroring Joel, Isaiah and the other prophets:

Beware of practicing your piety in front of others to draw their attention

When you make donations, be humble and quiet

When you pray, don't be dramatic.

When you fast, don't overplay it.

And, as the prophets before him he turns to the primary fundamental message they are all making. Yes, it is important to reconnect with God, to repent and to return to right living, but of greater importance is to respond to God's call to us for our personal recommitment to love one another as Jesus loves us and treat one another with love and respect. To care for the poor, the marginalized, the immigrant and orphan.

My uncle was a Presbyterian Pastor at a large congregation in Hathorne California. Uncle Leo was a great story teller, when I would spend time with his family as a child it was not uncommon to have a bible study time after dinner, complete with his humorous edits. I know that one of his favorite passages was from today's Gospel.

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

What I recall from one evening when my cousins and I gathered in his study to read this passage and wait for his humorous retelling. It goes like this, a boy was given two coins and was sent to church, one of the coins was for the offering the other for an ice cream after church. As we walked along he dropped one of the coins into the sewer grate... My uncle asked, which coin was lost the boys coin or the coin for Jesus, and asked us to think on the question, but not to answer, just to pray on the question. We joined hands to pray as we always did, and he ended the prayer study time without answering his question. This was not his normal behavior.

You can imagine how uncomfortable my cousins and I were with the non answer.

A few years later I invited my uncle to come to our EYC meeting and speak; to my surprise I was shocked that he repeated the same reading, the same coin story, but instead of letting the group of 13 to 17 year old youth leave as he had a few years earlier, he had each of us share where we thought our treasure and our heart was, and what it meant when Jesus said, heaven has come near you. He shared with us his call to the ministry, and where God was calling him in the future.

My uncle retired from active ministry 5 years later, and spent many years building houses for immigrant farm workers in the central valley and in central America; I believe he found where his heart was. My cousins confirmed it was the happiest time of his life. As I look back 60 years later I believe I am beginning to understand.

And so this Ash Wednesday I would like you to consider this question, is your treasure where your heart is? What would you change in your life to align your treasure and your heart.

Lent is not an oversimplified time to go on a diet from chocolate, or coffee, reading the news, or taking longer walks or running more often. It is also not about feeling guilty or remorse. It is about returning to God, returning to the way of love, and to move beyond our ordinary behaviors towards the heaven on earth we yearn to experience. It is time to recommit once again, in the words of Archbishop Oscar Romero

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

It is a time to remember that we are as dust, dying to the patterns of our past, following Jesus to Jerusalem and his death and resurrection, and being born again, raised with him, into a new way of being.

Walter Brueggemann

Marked by Ashes

Ruler of the Night, Guarantor of the day . . .

This day — a gift from you.

This day — like none other you have ever given, or we have ever received.

This Wednesday dazzles us with gift and newness and possibility.

This Wednesday burdens us with the tasks of the day, for we are already halfway home

halfway back to committees and memos,

halfway back to calls and appointments,

halfway on to next Sunday,

halfway back, half frazzled, half expectant,

half turned toward you, half rather not.

To paraphrase Joel, change your life not just your clothes. Come back to God. God is kind and merciful, patient and extravagant in love.