

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Reflection for Ash Wednesday, February 17, 2010
Scripture Reading: Romans 12:1-2,9-21

SPIRITUAL HOW?

When he presumes to argue against God's righteous judgment to destroy the city of Sodom for its evil, Abraham says, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes." In anguish at having been violated and then thrown out as though she were at fault, King David's daughter Tamar "put ashes on her head, and tore the long robe that she was wearing . . . and went away, crying aloud" Having protested his own senseless suffering and cried out to God for justice, then at long last heard God's voice out of the whirlwind, the legendary Job responds, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

Ash Wednesday is a day for repentance for Christians preparing to undertake the spiritual journey of Lent. The ashes symbolize our elemental creaturehood before the everlasting God: we are but dust and ashes. They represent also distress and grief, as for Tamar who was doubly shamed, being first violated and then treated like dirt. The ashes can serve also as an admission of sinfulness and empty-handed exposure of the soul to God. I have nothing with which to commend myself, for my life is but dust and ashes, and so I can only sit and wait for God's judgment or compassion.

Attaching such a strong expression of remorse, not to a desperate condition of life, but to a particular day requires us to ritualize the act of repentance, since we obviously cannot expect such powerful negative emotion to come upon all of us on the designated calendar date. To mean anything significant, Ash Wednesday must reflect an attitude toward life as a whole and not just a singular set of painful circumstances. Some of us will, no doubt, be feeling bad on a particular Ash Wednesday, but others will be quite happy and some downright carefree. There is no need to fake sorrow or remorse, but we do need to make repentance as honest and real as we can and as specific as our lives allow.

The core meaning of the biblical word for "repent" is to "turn" or "return," and so the season of Lent begins with a time of self-reflection when we look at our own lives in light of Jesus' call put our trust in him, serve him by serving others as he served God by giving himself us, and live in his way for the sake of this world God loves. Lent is traditionally a time for seeking new depth spiritually, which Ash Wednesday suggests begins with turning anew to God with no sense of deserving or entitlement.

Who am I before God, and how does my life reflect the love and justice of Jesus Christ? What are my treasures in life and where have I placed them? For Jesus assures me that where my treasure is, there my heart will be also.

If indeed Lent is a season for seeking greater spiritual depth, we need to ask, “What is spiritual?” Paul offers us a starting point. “Think,” he says, “of God’s mercies.” It’s very important to start at that point before we consider what it means to be transformed by the renewing of our minds rather than conformed to the attitudes, values, and ways of this age. Parents hope and pray their children will have the inner strength and sense of self not to go along with crowd as they move through adolescence. Paul is telling us to be different, but he immediately reminds us, rather sternly, that different in Christ’s way does not mean superior. Spirituality is not elitist; it does not hold itself above others. Neither is it monastic; it does not retreat from the world to keep itself pure and unstained. True, Jesus took his opportunities to retreat from the crowds for some time alone with God but to regain the strength and energy to go back to the people. He renewed his mind and body for service. Caring about people and entering into their struggles and griefs is draining, and even Jesus needed time to refresh his own spirit. We need to do things that are good and healthful for us, that refresh and renew, but for what purpose? We do not live for ourselves but for the Christ who suffered and died for us. If spiritual means no more than contented in myself, for myself, then it means nothing to God and is just vapor.

Ask Paul what it means to present our bodies to God as a living sacrifice, which is our spiritual worship, and he starts talking, not about religious rites or personal devotions or giving up something pleasurable for self-improvement, but about the ways in which we respond to other people, especially those we might by nature wish to ignore or even hurt. Suddenly, our “spiritual worship” gets refocused upon the difficult friend, relative, or associate and then upon the stranger and the enemy. It’s easy to be nice to people who are nice to us. It’s a cinch to get along with like-minded and jovial companions who do not challenge our beliefs, our assumptions about life, or our prejudices either. If you want to test the theory, try being the one in the group who does not laugh at the joke which makes fun of some out-group, some others *not-us* regarded with disdain. You will find yourself resentfully accused of having no sense of humor.

It is natural to associate with people of our own social class or grouping. It is natural to welcome friends and be suspicious of strangers. It is natural to strike back at people who deliberately do us harm or at least to harbor our resentments and nurse our grudges. It is natural to like those who like us and favor those who in some way benefit us. It is natural to treat other people as they have treated us, not as we would like them to have treated us. Obviously, there is a big difference between being natural and being spiritual.

The great Jewish philosopher, Abraham Joshua Heschel, distinguishes between two types of spirituality. One type seeks to escape the messy involvements of life in this world, to rise above the embarrassments of our being creatures with physical bodies, and to lose the passions and desires of the self in mystic union with God. The other type of spirituality, which Heschel calls prophetic, has just the opposite experience of God thrust upon it. Prophet spirituality comes with being drawn into some measure of harmony with the desires and longings of God. The prophet feels some of God's anger at the injustices done to the vulnerable. At the same time, the prophet shares some of God's disappointment and sorrow over the state of the human soul so willing to mistreat others for its own advantage. Prophetic spirituality does not open for us an escape hatch from the greed of the market, the cruelties of social life, or the banalities of people trying to get by without committing themselves to anything greater than survival and pleasure. Because it is drawn into sympathy or harmony with God, prophetic spirituality expresses itself in empathy and compassion. It cannot give up on this world and its people because God will not.

So, what might we seek during this Lenten season? We have some guidelines. Let me end by trying to put them into my own words, which I find can be a helpful exercise. I'm speaking to myself but inviting you to listen in.

- ▶ Love the world; it is God's beloved creation, and God made us its stewards.
- ▶ Give yourself to wonder at life and at all God has made.
- ▶ Trust God, and let yourself be human; it's what God made us to be. Accept bodily, creaturely life as right and good and capable of living in God's image.
- ▶ Let yourself realize how much God loves and cares for the people of this world – all of them. If that's hard sometimes, start by looking at the children.
- ▶ Stop trying to be better than others. Paul tells that if we are going compete (and he knows we are), to put a twist on it: "outdo one another in showing honor."
- ▶ Strive for mutuality in relations with other people. Be neither condescending nor servile. Strive to please God ahead of others or self, but with respect for others and self.
- ▶ Seek to know the concerns and ways of God. This spiritual objective requires my attention to the "means of grace": to the Bible, prayer, the sacraments, reflection, and study. It's an ongoing course in life with a richly varied curriculum.
- ▶ Practice empathy and compassion. Familiarize yourself with the injustices in our society and our world. Learn about people and listen to them. Appreciate them. Fight our natural tendency to judge others by their worst actions but ourselves by our best intentions.
- ▶ Make caring an action and not just a feeling. Learn not just to give but to share.

Amen.