

Feast and Famine
Presbyterian Church of New Rochelle
Ash Wednesday
February 10, 2016

“You are dust, and to dust you shall return”. These are the words God spoke to Adam in the Garden of Eden after they had eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Do you remember what the serpent said to Eve about the fruit: “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” (Genesis 3:4-5) “You are dust, and to dust you shall return” is a stark reminder from the Creator himself that we are emphatically not God! We may be his image-bearers, but we are not God. As we take this first Lenten step toward the Cross, we are reminded in a bold and graphic way that notwithstanding our many accomplishments, we were created by God and without God we are nothing. The serpent reminds us that we have known the distinction between good and evil since the days of Eden. The Psalmist reminds us that we were born guilty; sinners in our mother’s womb (Psalm 58:3). But we know that when we reach the cross God will wash us clean; clean as freshly fallen snow, and we will be forgiven.

The word Lent is middle English and its meaning conveys the lengthening of days associated with springtime. Lent of course is a creation of the church there is no scriptural basis for this 40-day period of preparation. In fact, Ash Wednesday didn’t become a part of the church calendar until 1091. Determining when the 40-day period would begin was an arithmetic exercise once the astronomers had determined Easter’s date. In order to have 40 days of fasting not to include Sundays – remember Sundays were considered feast days – church fathers needed six weeks +4 days which brought them to Wednesday.

But you can’t fast on an empty stomach so they invented Mardi Gras or Fat Tuesday. Actually, it evolved as the closing date of Carnival that began way back on Epiphany or Twelfth Night. In many cities Mardi Gras or in Europe more commonly Shrove Tuesday has become an elaborate celebration that includes parades and grand parties that often involve costumes and masks. After all that

excess and revelry, Ash Wednesday is a complete about face. Ash Wednesday is a day of confession when we strip away any façade as we come before God, our Creator. The unavoidable truth is that most days are Mardi Gras are they not? We tend to overindulge all our senses so that there is no time to savor and learn from the moment. We wear our masks to work, and we wear it in front of the family – or is it a different mask? and we wear it to church. But on Ash Wednesday we strip away our masks and remember that we belong to God.

On Sunday I saw a new play called The Trial of Martin Luther. It is a cleverly conceived bio-play about the Catholic monk and academic who history has made the poster boy of the Protestant Reformation. We are all familiar with Luther’s objection to selling indulgences to stuff the church’s building fund. An indulgence was a certificate issued by the church promising to improve your “lot” in the afterlife. Why, you could even buy them for your dear, dead parents. I don’t know whether for a hedge-fund sized donation you could get all the way to heaven but you could at least upgrade to business class if you were headed in the other direction. My point is that death, while absolutely certain and repentance, while absolutely needed, were most highly valued by the church for their fund-raising prowess. Just breathe a little hellfire and damnation and the pews and the coffers are filled to brimming. That is the message of many of the most successful mega churches. That is the message we get clearly from the Hebrew Scripture where the prophets connect Israel’s woes to its sinful behavior.

So why all this death and repentance? Have we taken it too far? Alternatively, have we lost something by over-emphasizing God’s love through Jesus Christ? What is the point of the ashes and the fasting? How might it make us better disciples? I believe Lent is a step toward reclaiming spiritual discipline. I see its need in my own life where I am unable to maintain a consistent routine from day to day and week to week. I wonder if part of the reason why the nation is suffering an obesity epidemic is our lack of dietary

discipline. I wonder if part of the reason our spiritual discipline withers is we fill our days with mindless activities – keeping the television on all day or going to the mall because we are bored, spending far too much time on social media. Sometimes we even boast of it calling it our ability to multi-task. I don't want to launch a crazy guilt trip here but Ash Wednesday reminds us of the hollowness of so much of what we do. Even more, it reminds us that we can't go it alone – we need God's love and support especially in today's complex and uncertain world. Part of the Lenten discipline is to make a focused effort to remove whatever is pushing us away from God. An alternative would be to take on something that will pull us closer to God. Why not do both? Removing one should leave enough room for the other. During these six weeks call on God's help and support each other as you make that special effort to be changed by God's grace.

Discipline has a variety of definitions including: 1) punishment; and, 2) training that corrects, molds, or perfects the mental faculties or moral character. There are several others listed in the dictionary but these two illustrate the problem. The first definition given by Merriam-Webster is punishment. As Christians we often think of it as God's response to our not keeping the commandments. But I much prefer the second definition: training that corrects, molds, or perfects the mental faculties or moral character. I think that's what we're after during Lent.

Charles Hefling wrote a challenging article in *Christian Century* (Mar 20, 2013) magazine a few years back asking "Why the cross?" In setting up his argument he makes the rather provocative statement that "If the cross is God's punishment, then God is not just." If Sunday after Sunday we come before God and each other with a prayer of confession followed by a Rejoicing in God's Forgiveness we must ask ourselves if anything has really changed? If the answer is no, then being forgiven is not a positive good, says Hefling; it is only a double negative. So I hope at least some of you have reflected on a line from the assurance of pardon that I use from time-to-time: that God is ever willing to grant us forgiveness, but that we cannot receive it if we are unwilling to be *changed* by it.

This gets to what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls cheap grace. Do we take our forgiveness for granted? In our enthusiasm to preach the love of Christ do we lose sight of the unimaginable price paid for that grace. As Bonhoeffer says: Grace without price; grace without cost! The essence of grace, we suppose, is that the account has been paid in advance; and, because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing. Since the cost was infinite, the possibilities of using and spending it are infinite . . . Cheap grace, says Bonhoeffer, is grace without discipleship, grace without the Cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate." (*The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 45, 47) Surely that is worth reflecting on this Lenten season. If God is ever willing to grant us forgiveness, but we are unwilling to be *changed* by it, what have we received?

I don't believe the point of Ash Wednesday and Lent is to feel burdened by guilt. But it does call us to examine our lives and make course corrections where needed. We know we are flawed and fall short of what God intends for us. This year let us try a different approach. This year do not walk around looking dismal, parading your disfigured faces so that others may be certain you are fasting! Rather let your consciousness be heightened so that you will be ready to hear the Word and respond to God's call. The point of fasting is to re-gain spiritual discipline in your life aided by the relatively simple act of denying yourself something pleasurable. It can be surprisingly difficult especially in the early days; don't lose that insight on the spiritual side. Fasting should be used to change your routine fostering an environment for change. Use that discipline to focus on the spiritual; to reinvigorate your relationship with God. In Lenten terms we are seeking to die to old ways so that we might be resurrected into a new, deeper, mask-free relationship with God.

Loving God, strengthen us that we may see you more clearly, love you more dearly, follow you more nearly, day by day.

Amen