

Isaiah 58:1-12
Psalm 103:8-14
2 Corinthians 5:20B-6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday C
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
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To Welcome In A Holy Lent

Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them... No matter how many times I hear these words on Ash Wednesday, they always sound strange to my ears. Today is the one day in the Christian year when our piety is clearly marked on our foreheads and visible – if we don't wipe off the ashes when we get in our cars - to everyone we encounter. In Jesus' day, people wouldn't have been at all embarrassed to wear their piety on their foreheads.... Or in any other visible way. Piety and religion in the first century Mediterranean world were not only acceptable, they were very public and highly valued. As awkward as it sounds to us today, EVERYBODY wanted everybody else to know what large sums they were putting in to the temple coffers. In fact, if you put enough money in, the trumpets would blast, announcing your generosity. I guess what that would look like today, is walking into church, calling out your name, announcing the amount of your pledge, and ringing the tower bells. Can you imagine it??? For people in our time, somehow it's ok to be on the "Founders" or "Directors" or "Choreographers" list at the ballet, but at church we'd sooner die than talk about how much we give. I wonder why that is?

Conspicuous consumption these days is often displayed in cars or houses or clothes or grown up toys or even charitable contributions. In Jesus' day it was money given in the temple. But then or now, Jesus' words apply... "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth" he said ... but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...".

We've all heard those words before – where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. And it's easy to get pretty esoteric about that. But Jesus wasn't so much esoteric as he was pragmatic. I don't think he meant that we should spend our time contemplating all things spiritual and heavenly, leaving the earthly things alone. Jesus was the incarnation of God, he was heaven come to earth and his attention was on God and God's beloveds. If we look to him for the pattern of our lives, we will find ourselves constantly engaging in the earthly issues of working for justice and peace, and sharing God's grace and love and mercy. To store up our treasure in heaven is not to be heady and passive, quite the contrary. It is to focus ourselves on doing God's good work in this world because we are the face of Christ ... heaven come down to earth. I think too, that Jesus wanted us to remember that our things – our money, our houses, our stuff, even our food – all of those earthly things are gifts, not rewards and certainly not markers of God's favor. All that we have is gift from God and those gifts are not meant to be hoarded or held on to. We are the Body of Christ. One body with many parts and what Jesus says is our gifts are given for the welfare of the Body of Christ and we are supposed to give them away or at least share them. Jesus wants us to set our hearts on heavenly things because that is really the only way

we will ever be satisfied. We don't need to worry about being successful – we need only be faithful. We don't need to worry about whether other people think we are important – we only need to be faithful. We don't need to worry about whether anyone is paying attention to us. God is paying attention to us. So while at first glance “not practicing our piety in public” seemed like a crazy thing to say on the day we etch ashy crosses on our foreheads, it really is the perfect thing for us today. Everything we have and even everything we are, will someday all be dust, no matter how much or little of it there is. Ashes are just ashes. Dust is just dust. And when we are reduced to ashes and dust, no one will care how big the pile is. And that, my dears, is the gift of Ash Wednesday. On Ash Wednesday we're offered the lovely reminder that the stuff of this life is only stuff and it isn't all there is. I find that to be a great relief. Today, as an ashy cross is etched into our foreheads, we remember that we are but dust. We remember that we are mortal, that God is God, that we are not. Today we are offered a new beginning in the recognition that we are so much the same and all of us are utterly beloved of God. Remembering that we are dust helps us to know that while we have all been uniquely created and gifted, in God's eyes we are all just beautiful, messy human beings who are all beloved and very, very mortal.

As a culture, we are uncomfortable with that. We pride ourselves on being in control, being the lone ranger. I recently came across a comparison of The Lone Ranger and his companion Tonto. And guess what? The Lone Ranger, that true American hero, self-made, independent and alone didn't look much like any hero in the Bible. But Tonto? Tonto was part of a tribe, community minded, and he knew he was dependent. It's interesting, isn't it?¹ Christians are meant to live in community, part of a tribe, dependent on God and each other. It's not what the world out there tells us. But it's true. *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth” Jesus said “... but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...”*.

In a few minutes, I will invite you into the observance of a Holy Lent, which will likely mean something different for each one of you. the key, though, is observance. The church year gives us everything we need if we give over to it, and Lent is rich and reflective and not to be missed. At our house, there are more candles. There is less noise. There is more reading. There is less cooking. There is more praying. There are fewer movies. There is more solitude. There is less distraction. Lent for me is a time of turning inward, a time to rest and reflect and return to God. In Lent we're offered encouragement to fast and to give and to pray and to discover the many things we do to keep God at a distance. We're encouraged to look inward rather than outward, encouraged not to be afraid of what we might find. Jesus gives us everything we need to set our busyness and our fears and our anxieties aside so that God can come closer and closer. The practices of fasting, praying and giving are what we need to fill our souls Jesus tells us. THAT is how we will store up our treasures in heaven.

Some people take something on for Lent, some people give something up. The ancient practice of fasting is not deprivation for deprivation's sake, nor is it done so that we might suffer. To fast, to let go of something that we have perhaps taken for granted and assumed would always be available, is to

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2013/02/ash-wednesday-and-lent-in-2-minutes/>

remind ourselves that everything we have is gift from God and that if we are honest and true, we recognize that we are utterly dependent on God for our very life-breath. People fast from all sorts of things throughout Lent. I know someone who gives up television, another who gives up social media, another who gives up alcohol, another who gives up screen games, another who gives up chocolate. One year I gave up self-loathing for Lent. If you want to know the true gift of fasting, try fasting from negativity or anger or suffering or self-criticism. Like Jesus said, this fasting is for you, not for others. When we fast from the things that keep us from coming closer to God, we receive one of the many gifts Lent has to offer.

Many of us have learned that to pray at mostly the same time, in mostly the same place, in mostly the same way is to create more quiet and attentiveness in our lives, which brings more opportunities to hear the still small voice of God. A group of us on Wednesday evenings explored myriad prayer practices and found new ways to pray – walking the labyrinth, journaling, the daily office, drawing, centering silence. When we find our native prayer language, when we deepen our prayer lives, when we take up spiritual practice in earnest we DO come closer to God, to the ones we pray with and for, and we receive another of the many gifts Lent has to offer.

Almsgiving too is an ancient Lenten practice. We don't use the word "alms" very much anymore, but it refers to the money people give to the church in order that the church will rightly, justly and mercifully get that money into the places it can do the most good. When we give from the depths of our beings it is because we recognize that all we have is gift from God and that God has given us these good gifts for the life of the whole world, not just for us. It is a marvelous thing to be filled with the joy of taking our place as an integral part of the Body of Christ, offering what we have for the good of the whole Body. It's how the early church was formed and sustained, and our patron saint Barnabas was the exemplar... *Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.... There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means 'son of encouragement'). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.*² When we give, we take our place in the Body of Christ and receive still another of the many gifts Lent has to offer.

Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. These are the words that invite us into a Holy Lent. In the ashes and dust that remind us of our mortality, we find our beginning. To remember we are dust is to begin to understand that we can actually stop trying to be perfect, stop acting like we have it all figured out, stop pretending that our lives depend on being competent and beautiful and successful. So if we can just let ourselves be dust, and let God be God, we will have all that we need to welcome in a Holy Lent. We have 40 long luxurious days just to be. To be with God. To be with one another. To be with ourselves. To be. Amen.

² Acts 4:32-37