

Ash Wednesday 2017

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Psalm 103:8-14

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

This is a crisis moment.

And I mean that quite literally.

I'm not talking about our national life,  
About this turbulent moment  
When our country's identity and values are in sharp focus:  
Threatened, some of us believe,  
Strengthened, others believe.

And I'm not talking about our city,  
About the struggle to find ways  
To meet the most basic needs  
Of hundreds, thousands  
Of our sisters and brothers,  
In particular,  
The basic need for shelter.

I'm not talking about the health of our planet,  
Our beautiful, fragile,  
Debauched and resilient "island home."

We could talk about whether to use the word crisis  
When we speak of our national life,  
Our city's homeless children and women and men,  
Our planet's health.

But this is Ash Wednesday,  
And when I say, crisis,  
I am speaking literally,  
Talking about crisis in the formal sense.

A crisis is a moment of decision,  
A turning point,  
The pivot on which all the action hinges.  
The moment when life hangs in the balance,  
From which we turn towards healing or death.  
The moment when character is revealed,  
And we understand how events flow

From who we are:  
Our character, our choices,  
Our flaws and our best intentions.  
A crisis is a moment  
From which there is no return,  
Only a choice of how to go forward.  
Two roads divide,  
And we take one.

Ash Wednesday is a crisis –  
A crisis in our collective life in faith.

As a people,  
On this day,  
We see who we are,  
All too clearly.  
On this day,  
We admit that we are human,  
Formed of the dust of the earth.  
We remember that we are dust,  
And to dust we shall return.

Once we face this most basic truth  
Of our existence,  
That we are dust,  
Then we must choose:  
How will we live in this truth?

There is a real choice to make here.  
Two roads divide.

There is a way of emptiness,  
And a way of hope.

Our humanness, our finitude,  
Our frailties,  
Our mortal existence  
In a world that will someday come to an end,  
This utter finitude  
In a world of dust –  
If we take this way of emptiness,  
Then there is another choice:  
Despair,  
Or facing the emptiness with courage  
And absolutely no expectations.

Many people make the choice for courage.  
To live in a world without hope,  
Without expectation,  
Sets some people free,  
And in that freedom  
They choose the good.  
This is an honorable choice.

But we are not that people.  
We remember that we are dust,  
And we choose hope.  
We choose reconciliation.

I appeal to you,  
On behalf of Christ,  
Be reconciled to God.  
Now is the acceptable time,  
The moment of salvation.  
We can choose the way of reconciliation.

Reconciliation follows a clear pattern –  
A pattern that begins at the turning point of crisis.

It begins with truth.  
Speaking truth,  
Listening to truth,  
Validating truth.  
Today, this truth:  
We are dust, and to dust we shall return.

Reconciliation continues  
With an acknowledgement of brokenness,  
Of harm done willingly or unwillingly,  
Things done and left undone.

Then we make amends.  
When and if it is possible,  
We repair, restore,  
Replace what has been broken,  
Offer, accept what is new.

Then we establish new patterns,  
ways of speaking and acting and listening,  
of refraining and engaging,  
that will bring life.

And somewhere along the way,  
We ask and offer forgiveness.

We do this with each other,  
When we have enough will and courage and love  
To do the hard work.

We can do this with God, too,  
With the one who is always longing for relationship  
With each of us,  
And with all of us in community.

Now is the acceptable time.

The one who wrote those words,  
Be reconciled to God,  
Now is the acceptable time,  
Become the righteousness of God,  
Knew as well as anyone could,  
How profound and life-changing  
This reconciliation could be.

The apostle Paul  
Had a story book moment of crisis,  
Knocked off his horse  
And blinded  
By a flash of light  
And a voice from heaven.

That forced on him a moment of decision,  
Of choice.  
He told the truth about himself,  
How he had been a persecutor  
And slanderer,  
Breathing rage and murder.  
He acknowledged his brokenness,  
Made tangible in his blindness.  
He retreated to the desert for three years,  
In order to understand what had happened to him.  
He sought to make amends,  
Returning to tell his story to those whom he had persecuted,  
And then,  
He went out on the road,  
To tell the good news  
Of how the Christ who reconciles the world to God  
Had turned his life from murderous rage

To transforming zeal.

When he appealed to the Christians in Corinth  
To be reconciled to God,  
He knew what he was talking about.  
Do we?

Now, more than ever,  
We are called to be a people of reconciliation.

We are called, daunting as it may seem  
To a people made of dust,  
To become the righteousness of God,  
Actors in the drama of salvation.

People who understand and accept  
What the world is like.  
Who acknowledge both the beauty  
And the frailty of this island home.  
A people who say,  
The universe is flying apart and will come to an end.  
And yet there still lives,  
In the poet's words,  
"the dearest freshness deep down things  
because the Holy Ghost over the bent world broods . . ."

Fresh springs from the dust.  
When we speak this truth about the world,  
We become partners with God.

We are called, daunting as it may seem  
To a people made of dust,  
To shine a light on the world's brokenness  
And our brokenness within it,  
To speak against injustice,  
To combat cruelty,  
To name oppression and want and need.

We are called,  
Even as we remember that we are dust,  
To embrace hope,  
To trust in what is beyond what we can know or see.

We are called  
To pause at every moment of crisis,  
Every moment of decision,

And make a choice:  
Will I act as though there is no meaning,  
As though there is no future,  
As though nothing matters  
Because it is all dust?

Or will we say,

We are dust,  
But we are dust made alive  
By the breath of life itself,  
Made lovely by love itself,  
Made whole and healed  
By the one who makes all things new.

We are dust,  
And we matter.  
We have a future and a hope.  
Our lives and our choices have meaning.  
We are reconcilers,  
Partners with God  
In the awesome work  
Of shining through the dust.