

Ash Wednesday 2018

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Psalm 103

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6

For generations  
And centuries,  
Through all the history  
Of the people of God,  
We have gathered  
To face the hard truth of who we are.

To voice our hopes  
That we may, we might,  
We can  
Become what we receive:

Repentance,  
Reconciliation,  
And renewal.

To remember who we are:  
A people who always and everywhere  
Have the strength and the courage  
To begin again.

A people who always and everywhere  
Have the integrity  
To stop, look around,  
And take stock.  
Are we headed in the right direction?  
Do we need to turn around?

Repentance means turning around.  
Nothing more.  
And nothing less.  
There is always something  
From which we need to turn,  
Something we need to let go,  
Something that is dragging us down.

For generations  
And centuries  
We have gathered on this day

To commit ourselves again  
To the hard work,  
The liberating work,  
Of turning around and repenting.

Through the centuries  
We have used different words  
To express our longing  
To take stock, ask forgiveness,  
And make a new and right beginning.

We have driven a scapegoat into the wilderness,  
We have called ourselves miserable offenders  
And claimed that there is no health in us.

We have mortified our flesh  
In a variety of ways.  
We have called ourselves names.  
We have denied ourselves pleasures  
And refrained from embracing  
Sources of life and delight.

All these words and customs  
Have met our need,  
In each time and place,  
To make a new and right beginning.

Here and now,  
We signify our intention,  
Give voice to our longing  
To make a new and right beginning  
When we enter, together,  
Into a prayer of intention,  
The litany of penitence.

The words are broad,  
All encompassing,  
But as is true week by week  
In the general confession,  
Unless we stop and wonder  
What the broad and all encompassing words mean  
For each of us, in our own lives,  
And for all of us,  
In the societies and structures  
That support and constrain us  
Then we can slide right past them,

Thinking only of the beauty of the words.

What do the words of the litany of penitence  
Mean for us, here and now?

In this year  
When we have been forced to see  
And invited to contemplate  
The magnitude of our corporate sin,  
The degree of our complicity,  
The enormity of the harm,  
In this year when it has been harder than ever  
To hide from who we are,  
Let's enter more fully into the truth  
Of the litany of penitence.

The harms we have done,  
Intended or not,  
Are not new –  
And have never been hidden from the victims.  
What is new this year  
Is the unveiling,  
The spotlight,  
The sharing of stories.

So when you enter into the litany this year,  
Begin anew.  
Let the timeless and beautiful words  
Speak to you of timely,  
Of ugly realities.

When you hear,

*We have not loved you with our whole heart, and mind,  
and strength.  
We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.*

Wonder, who my neighbor today?  
Who deserves my love and respect,  
And has not received it?  
Whose cries have I ignored?  
Whose full humanity have I denied?

When you hear,

*Our self-indulgent appetites and ways,*

*and our exploitation of other people,*

Wonder, how did we end up in this place  
Where our political life,  
The institutions and actions  
That are intended to govern  
Our interactions with each other  
And promote the common good,  
Became the arena  
In which we exercise our basest impulses?

How did we end up in this place,  
Where our entertainment  
Depends on the ruthless and cynical exploitation  
Of those we pretend to admire,  
But use for our own ends,  
Whether in sports or movies  
Or any other arena where needs are met?

When you hear,

*Our anger at our own frustration,  
and our envy of those more fortunate than ourselves,*

Wonder, how often do I rage at the world,  
When I don't get what I want or believe I deserve?

When you hear,

*Our negligence in prayer and worship,  
and our failure to commend the faith that is in us,*

Wonder,  
Does being a Christian make a difference in my life,  
Or in the life of the world?  
Does being a Christian help me maintain the virtue of hope?  
Give me the strength to carry on?  
Do the people around me see and know  
That the faith within me  
promote life and wellbeing,  
justice and renewal?

When you hear,

*...all false judgments... uncharitable thoughts toward  
our neighbors, and ...*

*our prejudice and contempt toward those who differ from us,*

Do you wonder this:  
Who on the other side,  
Whatever sides we're talking about,  
Who on the other side  
Am I treating with contempt?

When you hear,  
*For our waste and pollution of your creation,*  
*and our lack of concern for those who come after us,*

And when you respond,  
*Accept our repentance, Lord.*

Do you wonder,  
  
How am I perpetuating the waste and pollution I condemn,  
And what changes am I willing to make?

The litany of penitence  
Is no formality,  
However formal the language may be.

It does not make explicit  
The particular sins of which we are now hyper-aware:  
the abiding sin of racism,  
Called the original sin of our country,  
A sin that shapes all our lives.  
The sin of sexism,  
Leading over and over  
To predatory attacks and innuendos,  
And thwarts the full flourishing  
Of half the human race.  
It does not make explicit  
The climate crisis,  
A change that will affect our planet forever.

But the words of the litany of penitence,  
If we let them mean something,  
Speak to all the ills of this day and age.

They convict us, here and now.

But the purpose of this day  
Is not to go away heavy-hearted.

Yes, we go away aware of our humanness,  
And our utter inability  
To be anything other than human.

And yes, aware of our humanness,  
Our life of infinite possibility,  
Our life sanctified forever  
By God's choice to become one of us.

We are the people made of dust, yes.  
We are the people made of dust,  
But we only breathe,  
Only love and aspire and repent,  
Because our dust is brought to life  
By the breath of the one  
Who makes all things new.

When you receive the ashes,  
When you pray the litany,  
When you take the life of God  
Contained in the bread and wine,  
Know this.

Your dust is holy.  
Your dust is loved.  
Your dust,  
Like everything that God has made,  
Will live forever.

Live, and breathe,  
And take hope today.  
This is a day of dust,  
But the dust is the stuff of creation.  
Live begins here.