

Ash Wednesday 2023

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Psalm 103:8-14

2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Many years ago,
When I was a relatively new
And fairly young priest,
I was invited to offer a Lenten Quiet Day
At a church in another diocese.

I was acquainted with the rector,
But knew almost nothing about the congregation.
But the rector and I had a long phone conversation,
And afterwards I sent him –
By the new and startling medium of electronic mail –
A proposal for a three-part quiet day,
Based on three words
From the lessons and liturgy for Ash Wednesday.

I have no memory of what the title might have been
For the first session.
The second session was called “Humility.”
And the third was “Reconciliation.”

The next day the rector called me up.
This looks great, he said.
I love the first and third sessions.
But that middle one, on humility.
Let’s talk about that one a little more.
I’m just not sure
That reflecting on humility
Is right for this parish.

Not right? I wondered.
Not right in what way?

Is this a parish,
Unusual for an Episcopal church,
Where reflecting on our shortcomings
And our continual need for mercy and forgiveness
Is part of the daily and weekly prayer and proclamation,
Not just in the general confession,
But in the preaching and teaching and conversation?

There are Christian traditions where that is so,
And when it is so,
A Lenten emphasis like ours,
Forty days and forty nights
Of self examination and discipline,
Can seem over the top.

But I had no reason to believe
That this was an unusual Episcopal church,
With more emphasis than most on the reality of human sin
And the truth of divine mercy.

Was this, I wondered,
A parish where the experience of oppression and exclusion
Was so overwhelming
That talk of humility was overkill?
A place where the good news
Must be all about God's love and acceptance and will to freedom?
Where an invitation to humility
Could only be understood
As an extension of relentless suffering and humiliation?

But I had no reason to believe
That this was an Episcopal church
Where the majority of parishioners
Were subject to systemic, systematic oppression.

I couldn't figure it out,
So I asked.
Why not talk about humility?
Why is it not right for this parish?

Well, said the rector,
This is a place where people feel pretty good
About themselves,
And their lives,
And their good works.
Humility seems false to them,
Like they need to make something up.
I just don't think they'll want to listen
Or say anything in a session about humility.

In the end,
I used most of the same material I had planned,
But I called the session something like,

Self-awareness.

I'm not sure people were fooled.
When the rector called to thank me the following week,
He let me know
That in their evaluations,
The participants gave high marks to the first and third sessions.
But, many of them said,
The middle section didn't have much to say to them.

I learned a lot from that experience.

Humility, it often seems to me,
Is one of the most difficult of the virtues.
None of them are easy, of course,
But humility is perhaps extra hard
Because we don't understand it.

And yet,
There is no Lent,
No Lenten practice,
No Lenten discipline,
No Lenten repentance and reconciliation and renewal
Without humility.

Because humility is,
Quite literally,
The dust virtue.
Its roots are in the earth,
The earth from which we come.

Remember that you are dust,
We say today.
Remember that you are dust,
And to dust you shall return.

Humility,
Said one of my former spiritual directors,
Is the simple admission
Of what is.
No embellishments,
No adornments or enhancements.
No makeup or soft lighting
Or careful angles.
Simply what is.

The willingness to say,
This is who I am.
This is who we are.

In our troubled times,
There is an impulse,
When something terrible happens,
To push it away,
To distance ourselves from the events
And the perpetrators
By saying,
This is not who we are.

It's understandable.
We don't want to be who we are.
But we are who we are.
Even the best of us
Cannot help but hurt each other,
Deceive ourselves and others,
Fall short,
Grow weary,
And lose heart.
It's who we are.

Humility is the virtue
That allows us to admit
This is who we are,
Like it or not,
Wish it were otherwise or not,
Try as we might to do better.
Humility says,
This is who we are.

And Lent is the time
To practice that difficult virtue
Of admitting who we are.

Because humility is not the end of the story,
But the beginning.

Humility opens the way
To reconciliation with God and each other.
It helps us build a new life
From the ground up,
A life based in what is.
Only a life based in the truth of what is

Can be a life that reaches beyond what is
To what can be.
Beyond the here and now
Lives the promise,
The renewal of all things
Already thriving in the dream of God.

We are dust,
But we are dust
Brought to life
And sustained, inspired,
By the breath of God.

This is the invitation of Lent,
To remember,
And celebrate,
These twin truths –
We are dust;
We dust enlivened by the breath
Of the God
Who lifts the dust
And cradles it in loving hands,
And says that it is good.

The invitation to observe a Holy Lent
Is the invitation to undertake
Whatever habits, or disciplines,
Practices will help us remember and celebrate what is,
And envision what can be.

There is no single way
To observe this season.
But there is a single end,
To be reconciled to God.

Humility sets us on the road.
We begin in the dust from which we come,
Of which we are made.

Reconciliation with God and one another
Is the fulfillment towards which we move.
We can catch a glimpse of it now,
In the season of Lent,
When we clear away some of what clouds our sight,
And prepare ourselves
For the mystery God is preparing to unfold.