

Ash Wednesday

Brutal Honesty

Matthew 6:1-6

A Meditation

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The story Christians tell on Ash Wednesday exposes the unwelcome facts that we are sinners and we die. Without this narrative our sin remains hidden in self-deception. No wonder Jesus says, “Beware.” “Beware of practicing your piety before others.” And thus begins a battle between what is to be hidden and what is to be revealed. We need Ash Wednesday because there is almost no other place where we can be jarred from our superficial and trivial understandings of life and death. Ash Wednesday possesses such raw, unfiltered honesty. It takes away our breath. Let us observe Ash Wednesday with gritted teeth and like Jacob cry, “Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it.” And he was afraid. I do not blame Jacob; God is frightening. No matter how much our mish mash of mushy theology rocks us to sleep with spiritualized images of God, we take it all in like dupes because God scares the hell out of us.

Well, Jesus insists that our piety-practicing façade should be dismantled and our sin exposed. Our sin is not just individual but also national. Moralism has always been one of America’s historical defects. Stanley Hauerwas says that “we must be trained to see ourselves as sinners.” Why? Because our self-deceit hides our sin from us.

Yet we keep covering our sin, not with the righteousness of Jesus and his blood, but with our piety, our public declarations of righteousness, our strained versions of giving, fasting, and praying. We keep mocking the gospel with our made-up versions of what it means to follow Jesus. Some of our fellow Christians even use the American flag to cover our national wickedness. Even now, as our nation wallows in the consequences of two never-ending wars, we have trouble balancing our budget because of our insatiable appetite for weapons and our death-dealing ways. Our solution is to cut off a few more inches from society’s legs – the improvident old, the unemployed, the uninsured sick, and especially poor little children.

“Life is limitation” can’t be said too often in our deluded, positive thinking culture. But we know, we all know, that life is limits. At thirty-five a step slower. At sixty-five a fear of stairs. At seventy-five a bit of forgetfulness. At eighty-five “those children” have taken the car. Life is limits and our denial makes its worse. Of all life’s limitations the greatest is death.

Since we almost never talk about death, the only teaching that dominates our world is how awful death is – enemy. But consider the alternative – endless existence. Without death, life would be interminable. No wonder we sign documents instructing our families to “pull the plug”. Who would want to live for dozens of years hooked up to an array of extra kidneys and hearts and livers and a maze of wires, cords, and computers? Who would want to put a family through the macabre back and forth from home to hospital, sitting silently in our room, worrying about the cost, the wear and tear, and the guilt, always the guilt? I am not making fun of death, but it is part of life and it makes no sense for the church not to talk of living well **and** dying well. Death is so terrifying and awesome that the sooner we use our faith to come to terms with it, the better off we are. And church members deserve to have more preparation for death than the inept and downright scary sermons that often haunt the chapels of funeral homes. The eager martyrs knew this lining up to throw themselves into the flames for the glory of the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

In June of 1963, “Good Pope John” was facing his final hours on the earth. To those gathered around his bed, he said to his Doctor, “I am ready.” When his secretary collapsed beside the bed weeping, the pope reached out and touched him tenderly. “Courage, my son. I am a bishop, and I must die as a bishop, with simplicity but with majesty, and you must help me. Go get the people together.”

These words flowed from a deep faith and a profoundly Christian understanding of dying. There is elegance and a simplicity that marks the passing of a lamb of God’s own flock, a sinner of God’s own redeeming.” We move in simple peace and confidence toward our Good Shepherd. This vision is, of course, in tension with the death-denying culture we inhabit with its horrific misunderstanding of death. We have, in our insatiable desire to trivialize everything, managed to trivialize death. Can we not for one night hear the gospel that death is a step on the way, a journey along a road that Jesus himself traveled? We need not endlessly grieve the distant villages we will never see, or the promotions we never receive. We need not grieve the loves we will never embrace, the wrongs we will never right, the gold we will never earn, the ills we will never cure.

Ash Wednesday, with brutal honesty: “For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” Dust we are and to dust we shall return. Let us accept the imposition of ashes and pull away the layers of pretensions and lay bare our sinfulness and our limitations and join Jesus in his struggle with the powers of this world. There’s more to this story, but tonight is not the time for its telling. For now, let us walk in the darkness and submit to the reality of life and death.