

Ash Wednesday Sermon Text for March 2, 2022

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Deuteronomy 26:16-19, Mark 14:3-7

“When Jesus is in our midst”

Growing up at Pleasantville Presbyterian Church in Pleasantville, NJ, Ash Wednesday was not a part of our tradition. I don't know when Ash Wednesday became a part of the tradition of this church, but I do know that it was not a part of mine growing up. But there are some very strong Biblical references in Scripture to ashes and the significance of ashes especially in relationship to grief and its association to grief. In II Samuel 13:19 after Tamar was raped we read: “she sprinkled ashes on her head, tore her robe, and with her face buried in her hands went away crying.” We read about Job who in his grief states to God in chapter 42:5-6: “I have heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself; and repent in dust and ashes.” We read the prophet Jeremiah tell the people of Israel in chapter 6:26: “O my poor people, put on sackcloth, and roll in ashes; make mourning as for an only child.” Daniel states in 9:3 “Then I turned to the Lord God, to seek an answer by prayer and supplication with fasting and sackcloth and ashes.” Even Jesus uses the example of ashes as a sign of mourning when he states in Luke 10:13: “For it if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes.”

What we do here together in this church should never just come from the ideas that maybe we think of, but they need to have a Scriptural backing and context which not only makes sense, but is also that which God commands and wants us to do. This imposition of ashes in which we take part today ought to remind us of the grief and the mourning that we feel for a number of things. Primarily the sin which we have committed and for which God has already forgiven us. But in regards to the context in which we find ourselves in this world, it ought to be a time of mourning and grief for the war that has broken out in this world and our complicity and our participation in this act of sin, in this war.

Both of our Scriptures today require that we acknowledge and celebrate God in our midst not by word and speech, but as I John 3:18 states that we ought to love, not in word in speech, but in truth and action. Let's read.

READ

I have tried in my time here to emphasize that our faith is not a series of laws and rules that we have to obey which would in any way justify us before God. Our faith is defined by the

personal relationship that we have in Jesus Christ and how that faith is lived out through the church and within the community. We do not know the eternal life that God has in store for us because we have been good and we have followed the rules, we know the eternal life that God has in store for us because our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ has told us about it personally.

Having said that, our Scripture in Deuteronomy today begins with the very forceful words: I command you. We aren't used to being told what to do and we often chafe at the thought of being told what to do. But that is exactly what happens here in Deuteronomy. Moses as he gathers the people tells them what they have in store for their lives, but only if they follow the rules that God has laid out before them. Look at these verses, there are three statements that are all based upon quid pro quo. 1. God will be with you, and you will walk in his ways. 2. You are treasured by God, you will keep his commandments. 3. He will set you above all the other nations, you are to be holy.

He is telling the people of Israel there is a formula to follow in order for God to be in your midst. If you follow along with what I say then you are guaranteed that God will be in your midst. If you decide to go on your own way, well, then there are not only no guarantees, but rather I can pretty much tell you that God will not be in your midst and you will be on your own. In the old covenant, like we have seen on Sunday morning, God was in our midst when we did the right thing. But then Jesus came along and the new covenant which was written on our heart, whether we did the right thing or the wrong thing, was instituted where what we did was a result of a response to the love that we have for Jesus, as opposed to a rule that we have to follow.

In our second reading we find someone who understood this commandment and the desire to do the right thing as a response of love for Jesus as opposed to doing things in order to follow the rules. She broke all of the rules that were in front of her simply because she recognized that Jesus was in front of her. Let's set the context. There are so many things here that are out of context. Jesus is in Bethany, the home town of Mary and Martha and Lazarus, and it is two days before he has his last supper with his disciples, so he only has a few days left to live, but only he knows that.

He finds himself in the home of a leper, again, something that should catch our attention, and in front of everyone a woman comes in, we assume while they were eating since they were all seated at table, and she breaks a bottle of costly perfume, or nard that came from the Himmalayas, and touches Jesus by pouring it over his head. There are so many things wrong with this scene and so many things that a woman should not be doing to a rabbi in public that I don't know where to start.

But what the people around the table, his disciples specifically, object to, is that this perfume could have been sold and given to the poor. Jesus, instead, says no, she recognized that I am in your midst and that I will not be in your midst for long, so look at vs.8, she is preparing my body for my funeral, for my burial. Then again in vs. 6 she has performed a good service for me, she has done the right thing. If I were not here in your midst, then maybe you could object, but when I am here, the rules change.

People were not happy with that, especially Judas whom we read after this got up from the table and went to the chief priest to betray him. That may have been the last straw for him. Our actions tell volumes. We can do the right things, we can follow the rules, but if we do not know Jesus, then we are outside of the possibilities of what God can do for us. I Corinthians 13, the love chapter says it best: if I do all the right things, if I say the right things, if I give away all my possessions and even sacrifice my body but do not have love, I gain nothing.

The reason why we do the right thing is just as important as doing the right thing. We don't often think of that in our faith. Sometimes we think that what we do, how we celebrate lent in our times of discipline, is all that our faith is. But when we fast, or when we pray, or when we read Scripture because we truly want to be in love with Jesus and get to know him better, and to recognize that he is in our midst, well, that changes everything.

This past Sunday at the first service Dan Colvin was our head usher and his son Davis, who I think is 7, was helping him. Dan took the time not just to show him how to do the certain tasks, but to explain why they were being done and the importance of each of the things that they were doing. It wasn't just a job, it was something that they did in order to serve the Lord joyfully. That's easy to understand when you are ringing the bell, but when you have to pick up the left over bulletins and the trash that is left in the pews, that might be harder to understand.

At a very small scale what we teach our children with our actions speaks louder than what we tell them with our words. The woman who anointed Jesus and prepared him for his funeral could have sold the perfume and kept the money for herself, that was one option, she could have sold it and given it to the poor, that was another option, but she chose the good thing, which was to celebrate Jesus in our midst, that was the best thing. We would all do well to recognize Jesus in our midst.

Ash Wednesday is a day to remember that even in the face of our own mortality Jesus is in our midst. The spiritual disciplines that we follow for lent should not blind us to the immediate possibilities of devotion in front of us. We are called to obey and to be aware of the opportunities to serve that are right in front of us. Amen.