

Sermon February 18, 2018 "The Greatest of These... Makes a Heart"

Genesis 9:8-17 and Mark 1:9-15

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Our Ash Wednesday service was beautiful. Some people are squeamish, I know, about the idea of ashes on foreheads...it seems to be a ritual from some ancient non-protestant tradition....and some of us have trouble with any mention of death and mortality....What does it mean, "from dust we came and to dust we will return!?"

The beauty of this service that spoke to all 13 of us on Wednesday, was the sense of love...in the beauty of the Taize chants, in the words of simple prayers and scripture...and in the spaces between us as we stood gathered in a circle. Our prayer proclaimed these words, "***Affirm in us our solidarity with one another as we seek Divine Presence within our hearts and in the spaces between us.***"

As we begin this Lenten journey...this six week trek from the wilderness of our lives to the glory of Resurrection promise, my hope is that we, also, *affirm the Divine Presence in the spaces between us!* What a beautiful thing.

Let us be in prayer: God of our hearts, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together, be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.

First the stories. We begin Lent with Genesis, at the beginning of the Bible and the beginning of the telling of our faith stories. It is the familiar story of Noah. The part we hear is at the end when God realizes the flood was not such a good idea. God tells them that it was a mistake to cause such destruction to so many people and animals. And in this very anthropomorphic story, God apologizes. And not only that, like so many of us when we make a mistake, God makes a promise and says---"I will never do that again!"

I said that to Jeff one time when I left my seatbelt in the door of the car and the battery was dead in the morning. I promised, "I will never do that again!"

Theologian, David Lose writes: "God's promise never to repeat this kind of destruction is "an unheard-of-surrendering of divine power," and it introduces a new dimension of the ancient Hebrews' understanding of God as "inherently self-giving, willing to enter into a relationship that puts limits on even God's prerogatives."

In this lovely Biblical story that we all know so well....God needs a reminder not to cause such havoc again. The reminder is a rainbow in the sky. Like a big multi-colored post-it note in the skies!

What a nice thing to have reminders... a string tied on your finger, post-it notes on the refrigerator or perhaps you have digital reminders that alert you on your phones to remember where you are supposed to be at certain times.

I have a big calendar that I carry with me all the time...but I do have to remember to look at it each morning! You know you are getting older when you need reminders to look at your reminders!

God said the rainbow would be the reminder of the covenant...the relationship that God wanted with all of creation...a covenant, like the Divine Presence in the spaces between us... promising that never again would floods destroy this world.

I love how this story describes a God who wants to be in relationship with us always ...even if we wander, we break rules, and we forget.

Kathryn Matthews says this story is about remembering, reminding and relationship.

If we take the story literally, we could say that God was wrong because floods *have* come again, perhaps not ones that cover the whole of our world...but we know too well the stories of those affected by damaging floods...even in our own area. Most of us believe there is human responsibility.... If we do not stop filling our atmosphere with carbon dioxide then floods will continue. Is there any question that God longs for us to care for this earth...this incredible habitat of living things...people all over the world are beginning to act on these ecological responsibilities. The Church of England has asked people to "give up plastic for Lent!"

This Noah story also spoke to me of our current crisis. Another school shooting. God must surely be crying with us as we long to be able to say, "Never again will this happen! We promise, this will never happen again!"

God must surely be yearning for our country to come to its senses and stop the production of such weapons. God must surely be longing for us to reach out in loving connections with young white males who are so distraught that they would cause harm to children while in school.

How can we as a church influence these kinds of changes? What kind of letters should we send as a congregation to our Congress and President? I ask the Deacons and you as a congregation to consider the ways we can act on this.

There is a woman named "Momma Cat" who cooks meals for the homeless in St. Louis, Missouri. Appalled at the devastated communities succumbed to poverty, she said, "I can run from it, or I can be part of the change." We have a problem...we can run from it or we can be part of the change. It will take all of us.

Teachers are trying to find ways to be part of the change. I heard about a program where students write down four names of those they would like to sit with the following week. The teacher then looks at patterns to see which students are being left out...which ones are on the margins... and how can they be included?

It is also part of who we are as members of a church to keep an eye out for those who are hurting...to extend that welcoming hand....and look for the gifts of the other. So many of you do this. I think of how Budge has special needs youth from the high school come to help stock shelves for Good Neighbors every Tuesday at noon. If you want to see some joyful, energetic enthusiasm, stop by here on a Tuesday at noon!

Let's look briefly at the Gospel story in Mark. You have to listen to each word because the story moves along so quickly! We go from Jesus being baptized, the heavens breaking open and the Spirit descending on him *like a dove*...a beautiful image that you all know! But then it says, that the same *Spirit that was gentle like a dove one minute, is now IMMEDIATELY* driving him into the wilderness. Boom...he was blessed as a beloved son of God and then sent right out to the dessert to be tested by Satan! This is a Spirit-led venture into the dessert...into Lenten listening....into facing temptations...into perceiving the strength to say "no" *when God is with you!*

Jesus out there, along with wild animals AND angels, was tempted and each time, he refused.

I want to close with a poem by Maren Tirabassi that she wrote especially for this year when Ash Wednesday fell on Valentine's Day. She frames the poem around 1 Corinthians 13. You all remember this one..."if I speak in the tongues of mortals and do not have love...I am a noisy gong. Love is patient, love is kind.. When I was a child I spoke like a child... now I know only in part, but then I will know fully...now, faith, hope and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love?"

Now listen to Maren Tirabassi's poem, an improv on 1 Corinthians 13 for Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day...and what it means to be church!

If I speak in tongues of justice or spirituality,
but do not have ashes,
I am a self-congratulating vigil,
a Sunday service inspired by itself.
If I have social media outreach,
a labyrinth in the church garden,
Bible study in a brew-pub,
and, if I have a capital campaign
to remove pews, put in church chairs,
and even add a coffee shop,
but do not have ashes, I am nothing.
If I give to church-wide offerings,
and go on mission trips so that I may boast,
but do not have ashes, I gain nothing.

Ashes are awkward; ashes are dirty;
ashes, like love,
are not envious, boastful, arrogant or rude.

Ashes do not insist on a perfect Lent;
they do not even need to be in church
or a gimmick to get folks to church;
they do not inventory wrongdoing,
especially the wrongdoing of others,

but rejoice in the precious now,
the very fragility of life.

Ashes bear love, believe in love,
hope in the possibility
of forgiveness for everyone,
endure even times of loveless-ness.

Forgiveness never ends.
As for spiritual practices,
they will come to an end;
as for both the precious hymn
and the passionate praise song,
they will grow quiet;
as for theology and faith formation,
believe me, they will change again.

For churches are always reaching
for a part of things,
while those who flee church
reach for another part,
but, when the full forgiveness comes ---
it will look more like Valentine's Day.

When I was a child, I said "I love you."
I cut out pink and red hearts,
and gave them to everyone, even the bullies,
but when I became an adult,
I decided to make it more complicated.

Now in our churches and lives
we have become too fond of mirrors,
but some day we will see –

face to smudged face.
Now I love only in part;
then I will love fully,
even as I have been fully loved.

Today ashes, dust, and paper abide, these three;
but the greatest of these makes a heart.

Tirabassi is sending us out as a church community ...immediately into the desert to ask some tough questions...who are we...what are we about? Do we recognize Divine Presence in our relationships with one another...in our communities and our world?

I believe God refuses to give up on us, as William Lloyd Allen writes, "God's heart is touched by creation's suffering. The God declaring this covenant is not an objective judge meting out a just sentence, but a love grieved to the heart at the beloved's violence, yet still and always...seeking reconciliation."

As we walk into this Lenten journey...let us set aside time and quiet to listen for God...in our very beings, in the spaces between us...and to look for the hearts, that God makes.

Amen.