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Date: March 6, 2019
Sermon Title: Ash Wednesday Service of Prayer
Scripture: Romans 8:31-39

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Reflection - Rev. David Johnson Rowe

When I was a kid growing up, we didn't have Ash Wednesday—at least the "Ash" part. We had Lent, and it began on Ash Wednesday, but I don't think we even knew why it was called Ash Wednesday. I did see ashes, though. Where I grew up, folks were mostly Catholic, so my PS 90 classmates were mostly Catholic. So, sure, after school, on the playground, on the subway, going to the supermarket, I saw lots of people with black smudges on their foreheads. But that was the extent of my knowledge.

At our Church we had Lent, and Lent focused on giving something up, on sacrifice. We were taught that before Jesus began his ministry, he went into the wilderness for 40 days: 40 days of fasting, 40 days of doing without the basic comforts of life. And, of course, the devil came along and tempted Jesus with pleasure and power and the very basics he was denying himself. So for Jesus, it was also 40 days of testing himself against his most powerful enemy in the world: evil incarnate.

That was how we understood Lent. We got the 40 days part. We got the giving up something part. We got the "what-doesn't-kill-you-makes-you-stronger" part. For adults, that meant giving up smoking and swearing. For kids, it was chocolate and comics.

We thought of ourselves as emulating Jesus, taking a stand for what's right and against what's wrong. Looking the devil in the eye, even with all his temptations, and proving we were stronger in our little childhood minds. Besides, what comes at the end of Lent? Easter! In our little minds, we gave up chocolate for 40 days, and then on Easter, what happens? Your mother gives you a giant basket full of chocolate, including the biggest chocolate Easter Bunny imaginable, and they even had chocolate crosses. It made Lent a lot of fun, a great lesson for life: a little sacrifice now, a great reward later.

That wasn't all. Yes, we had a mid-week Wednesday night service just as we're doing now, with a few twists. First, it was every Wednesday during Lent. Second, it started with a potluck supper. Every imaginable casserole. And in those old days, every mom was a terrific cook. Indeed, after stuffing ourselves, we all went into the sanctuary and watched a movie. A movie. *In Church*. I think that was my father's revenge. He got kicked out of Bible College for being seen coming out of a movie theater in old Scollay Square in Boston. Now, here he was, pastor of his own Church, showing movies in the sanctuary during Lent.

So here's what Lent meant to me: you give up chocolate, you get a free buffet dinner every Wednesday, you get movies in Church, and at the end you get a gigantic basket of candy. What a deal!

So, I grew up, became a pastor. One Church, two Churches, three, four, five Churches before coming here, and I did the same things: midweek Wednesday night services, potluck casserole suppers, movies, and at the end, chocolate crosses.

Then I came here, and one day Alida says we've got to do Ash Wednesday. With ashes. No potluck supper. No movies. No chocolate crosses on Easter. Instead, ashes. Well, O.K., I said. My custom, at every other Church I've pastored, was to go in, let them do everything their way for a year, then I'd get rid of most of it. So I figured, one Ash Wednesday with ashes, then I'd scrap it. Twenty-two years later, we're still doing it, and doing it, and doing it.

Here, at 8 o'clock this morning. At the Bridgeport Rescue Mission this morning. At Sturges Ridge, the new retirement community; at the Watermark this afternoon. And we had ashes available here in the sanctuary all day long. And now, our evening service. The start of Lent, yes; a time for sacrifice and giving up, yes; Ash Wednesday, yes; with ashes, yes. Why? Two reasons: symbolism and death.

Let's get death out of the way first. Ash Wednesday is a reminder of our mortality. Life ends. Our days are numbered. We don't like to think about it or talk about, but the wisest among us would say, correctly, that death is part of the natural order of things. Get used to it. Literally. Not in a morbid, intense, panicked way.

In our weekly Bible Studies, we see Jesus, day by day, week after week, try to get the Disciples to be prepared: for his death, yes; and to some degree their own, yes. He didn't sugarcoat any of that. But in the big picture, Jesus wants us prepared for change. Things change in life all the time, in every way. Life itself changes: infancy, toddlerhood, teenager, adult, senior citizen.

When I do marital counseling, I always quote a friend who said, "What we need are more divorces, not fewer." Of course, everyone is shocked, so I hasten to explain that what that means is we all change. And over the course of any life, in any marriage, any family, there are many changes. Plenty of times when we need to divorce the past and embrace the future. Divorcing the past may mean some habits, some ways of being, some priorities, some assumptions—they've got to go. Divorce yourself from what wasn't working or wasn't helping.

The Lenten/Ash Wednesday emphasis on mortality is, then, a useful wake-up call. We don't have forever. We have now. Lent is supposed to shake us up, make us think, put first things first, get rid of things that shouldn't matter, zero in on what does matter. That's what Jesus accomplished in his 40 days of Lent. People talk about "getting centered." Well, Jesus got centered. No to the devil. No to cheap temptations. No to easy power. No to wasted life and opportunity. Yes to getting in shape for his life's work. All that in 40 days.

The other value of Ash Wednesday is as a symbol. There are things we do in Church life that carry a little extra power. Baptism, for example. I've never been in a Church that took Baptism more seriously than our Church, and I was a Baptist most of my career, where Baptism is, well, it's their *name*: *Baptist*! But here it's even more special. People want it, plan for it, celebrate it. Loved ones fly in for it, Godparents are selected with great care.

Same with Confirmation. We have incredible attendance every Monday for Confirmation class. Some Monday nights, when the teenagers meet with their adult mentors, we'll have 90 to 95 in attendance. And Confirmation Sunday itself, next to Easter, is the biggest Sunday of the year!

There are things in Church that just touch us. And Ash Wednesday, of course, literally touches us. It's personal, it's intimate, it's one on one. In educational terms it is "tactile." You can feel it, touch it. You come up the aisle, one by one; you and I stand facing each other, a foot or two apart. I look you in the eye, not

everybody at once. I look you in the eye, and I reach into the bowl, and my fingertips touch a hint of ash, and I place it on your forehead as I say to you directly, "God bless you."

There aren't many moments in Church life like that. Most of Church life, happily so, is communal. Holy Communion, coffee hour, Sunday worship, Church suppers, weddings, and funerals. Lots of us together. One big family all over the place, and less lonely. But tonight, for a brief moment it's you and I and God.

But . . . I still wish we had a couple of Wednesday night old-fashioned potluck casserole suppers in Lent. One year I made a casserole for a Lenten supper. Rice, Campbell's Chicken Gumbo Soup, Chef Boyardee meatballs, Parmesan. At the end of the evening while cleaning up, the Head Deacon said, looking at my casserole, "We should have had ashes."

Whatever brings you here tonight, we're pleased you're here. Maybe it's the start of Lent. Maybe to put first things first. Maybe to begin something important. Maybe to be reminded. Maybe for the ashes. Maybe you were hoping for a casserole and a movie. Maybe next year. Until then, we prepare our hearts and minds and spirits for the touch of ashes.

Prayer Before the Ashes:

Leader: Where is your treasure?
For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

All: *For the times I have treasured my own needs over others,
forgive me, God.
For the times I have treasured comfort over sacrifice,
forgive me, God.
For the times I have treasured being right over being kind,
forgive me, God.
For the times I have treasured pride over forgiveness,
forgive me, God.
For the times I have treasured keeping over giving,
forgive me, God.*

Silence

Leader: Forgive us, God.
Remind us what you treasure:

People: *The goodness of the human heart,*

Leader: The gentleness of forgiveness,

People: Our care for one another,

Leader: The capacity to heal,

People: The wonder of your saving grace.

*All: God, remove from us our sins and create a new spirit within us.
You have promised that when we call upon you, you are there.
Heal us, guide us, and create us anew,
And let us rest assured in the promise of your forgiveness.*

Ash Wednesday

(Genesis 3:19; Job 30:18; Ecclesiastes 3:20)

Life's mad dash
interrupted by ash
a bold cross upon the head
foreshadowing
the road ahead
life's path
toward death's ash to ash
dust to dust
the penalty of sin, we're taught
all our stuff
all for naught
 so we make a mark
 a smudge
 a nudge toward death
 a stark reminder
 of the great divider
 between breathless and breath
 life's end and life again
 removing
 once and for all
 the stain of Cain.

From *Fieldstones of Faith, Vol. II*
David Johnson Rowe, 2008