

2.17.10 Homily

Ash Wednesday

Jl 2:12-18; Ps 51; 2 Cor 5:20-6:2; Mt 6:1-21

This is what Paul says to us today, Ash Wednesday, as we begin again another season of introspection and penitence. As Christians, we are ambassadors for Christ. In Christ, we can become the very holiness of God. Filled with God's grace, we *must* live up to our potential. Anything less is un-Christian. This is the time, this is the place, these are the people – you...you...you...me. We have nothing to fear except fear itself.

Were truer words ever spoken?

Think about it.

It was on Ash Wednesday in 1972 that I began to believe again – or maybe began to remember, began to listen, began to *want* to believe. It was the reading from Joel that spoke to my heart, and then the poignant debut of *Hosea*, sung by a man named Tom who accompanied himself on the guitar, in a darkened church that was suddenly and completely dead silent but for those plaintive words and chords that spoke directly to me and tore my heart asunder. *Come back to me with all your heart. Don't let fear keep us apart.*

It was all I could do to stifle the sobs that wracked my body and threatened to dispel the silence. How did Tom know that it was fear that was holding me back? But Tom didn't write those words. How did the Weston Priory know it? How did Hosea know it? Dare I ask...how did *God* know it?

I'd like to tell you that from that day until this I have been faithful, but everybody here knows me too well to buy into that! Fear is so pervasive, so *human*, that I suppose none of us can ever completely rid ourselves of it. So what I will tell you is this: Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid of the consequences of being honest – whether it is with a friend or a foe, a family member or a stranger, an authority figure or a street person. Do not be afraid of organizations or institutions or governments or churches.

Do not be afraid. Because it is fear that separates us, one from the other, and it is fear that keeps us isolated from God. Because it is fear that hardens our hearts, to steel them against more hurt – and also against more love.

And what are we afraid of...really?

I think maybe we are, in the end, afraid of the truth that will set us free. We are afraid of the consequences of being free – the responsibilities, the recriminations, the absolute horror of absolute love. Way back in 1972, I was afraid that God could not forgive my youthful indiscretions – a common misconception about God and forgiveness of course, since God forgives *everything* ...even before *anything* happens for which forgiveness is thought to be needed. In more recent times, my fear was more honest. I was afraid God would give me what I was *supposed* to want and I would fail to measure up to God's standards – a common misconception about God and prayer of course, since God knows our heart...and doesn't expect things of us before we are capable of doing them.

I am not sure if the teaching Jesus gives to us each Ash Wednesday has ever been looked at in this way. But I think what Jesus may be saying could sound something like this:

If you perform acts of religiosity in order to impress others with your piety, you are not impressing God. Do you fear that if you don't do those things, God will be displeased with you? Does your effort to impress others stem from a deep-rooted fear that you *must* impress God? ... Did you ever go to an early Mass on Ash Wednesday so you could "proudly" walk into the office with a dirty face that could be on display the whole day?

And if you tithe so that you can brag to your constituents and take a significant write-off on your taxes, God sighs. But if you are looking for affirmation from others for the good that you do, are you also looking for condemnation for the good that you do not do? Is it fear that drives you? Fear that you are not *really* good enough... kind enough... giving enough to please God? Do you fear that God is more bookkeeper than lover?

Fear can be ill-founded. It is irrational, for example, to be afraid to come into the city because you might get mugged, but too many people live in that fear and allow it to keep them prisoners within their own homes. None of them are here with us tonight.

Fear can be well-founded. It makes sense, for example, to be afraid of crossing a busy highway on foot because you can't run as fast as the cars do and you certainly are no match for their heavy metal strength. The many people who live with that fear, however, do not obsess over it. I daresay they never really think about it. They just don't do it. Some of them are here with us tonight.

Fear can also be unfounded, in the strictest sense of the word, meaning it hasn't been found out. It is hidden even from ourselves. We fear humiliation. We fear failure. We fear being laughed at, cursed at, abandoned, betrayed. We fear our limitations, and we fear that God shares such human foibles with us – which is why we fear God.

Haven't we all heard the definition – “fear of God” – as meaning “awe,” being “in awe of” ... which is to say we *should* fear God. Balderdash! How can we love what we fear? Do you know how many times Jesus said, “Be not afraid”?

It is this hidden and insidious fear which has to be uncovered, exposed to the light of day in order for us to recognize it for what it is and work at excising it from our hearts. Because the more fear we hold in our hearts, the colder and stonier those hearts become. Because hearts of flesh beat fearless. Because the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.

As we embark on this Lenten journey to Jerusalem, let us reach out to one another in love, confident in the love of God that binds us together and beckons us to follow, fearlessly, the Crucified One who is risen and lives with us still.

Happy Lent!