



Ash Wednesday February 17, 2010

what and whose

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Mary Oliver writes in her poem “The Summer Day.”

*Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?*

It's a huge question, maybe the biggest of all: What will you do with your one life?

It's a question none of us can answer all at once. It's the question that takes a lifetime to answer. The church invites us to begin thinking about that question today. Again.

The liturgical year has cycled back us to Ash Wednesday, when we stand on the threshold of Lent. Lent compels us to think about life. Again.

Standing on the threshold, peering into the long expanse of this season, no color surrounds us except for some black, the color of the ashes that will be imposed, smudged, crossed on our foreheads as someone murmurs

Memento, homo, quia pulvis es,

Et in pulverem reverteris...

Remember, human, you are dust and to dust you will return.

These words and ashes call us to our beginning—formed by the hand of God from the rich, black dirt of the earth, breathed into life by the breath of God. And these words remind us of our inevitable ending—we will return to the earth—sometimes too soon. In the past year, this congregation has experienced this reality over and over. A 32-year old child of the church. A 54-year-old sister. A 72-year-old pastor. Ready or not, our life will end and we will die.

So what will we do with this wild and precious life of ours between the dust and ashes?

In one of his many rich observations, Frederick Buechner writes that in the wilderness, Jesus had to figure out what it meant to be Jesus. Lent is **OUR** wilderness time when every year we are called to consider

What it means to be Me.

What it means to be You.

Which is another way of saying what it means to be a Christian.

This is hard work no matter what your age or who you are. Even Jesus struggled.

I know some believe that Jesus knew from the moment of creation what being Jesus was all about. But there are just as many who believe that Jesus was working out his Jesus-ness, his child-of-God-ness throughout his life, right up to the end. There are many who believe he walked out of the wilderness with no idea where he was heading and what he was in for. The journey to Jerusalem was his time of figuring out what it meant to be Jesus, the child of God. No surprise we need to circle back every single year to work on our identity issues.

Lent compels us to think about life. Again

Lent offers us the possibility of changing and tweaking and maybe even transforming our lives. Again. The liturgical year gives us six Lent-weeks to drop everything and evaluate what we are doing with our life and whose we are becoming.

Ash Wednesday is when we begin our walk with Jesus through the spiritual landscape from Jerusalem to Calvary to build, bit-by-bit, our own understanding of being a child of God. Sure we do it in the other seasons, but Lent is the particular time set aside for this work.

Because the work is hard, the church gives us some tools to help, the disciplines associated with Lent: giving, praying and fasting. There are plenty of other important spiritual disciplines, good important practices associated with the Christian life, but these three are the Lenten back-to-basics, disciplines that are not about adding stuff but about opening up to God's presence and power to change us.

Give... Give what you have. Give time to a place or cause that needs your hands. Sign up to go to Ecumenical Advocacy Days in March to go to Capitol Hill and advocate for our members of Congress to change policy and remedy injustices in Colombia. Give long-underwear to the Walk-In Ministry. Visit someone who cannot get out. Writing is great. Showing up is better. Give money to One Great Hour of Sharing or one of our resident missions. Give as Jesus gave—regularly and fully.

Pray... Pray without worrying about getting the words right. Pray your thanks. Pray your confession. Pray for yourself and pray for others. God is not looking for a perfectly crafted piece of theology; God wants to hear from you. In the Joel reading, God says, "Return to me." Period. God does not say, pretty up your language before you call me. There are no conditions on your words: simple or complex, cheerful or angry, phrases or volumes. God just wants our words and our hearts. Tomorrow is an ok time to start, but tonight is even better. Pray without worrying and pray without ceasing.

Fasting... the last discipline is the hardest. Maybe you think of fasting means giving up some food, and you can certainly give up chocolate or wine or sugared cereal or whatever you think you could do without for six week. But, I'd like to offer two other ways of looking at fasting that go beyond this traditional understanding.

One way to fast **IS** to give up something that keeps you from giving yourself more fully to God. Maybe it means saying No to what sucks your life dry. Imagine for a moment what that might be. Only you know what that is. Maybe it means giving up the belief that we are powerful enough to do everything and anything. We are not God...

The other way to imagine fasting has to do with making choices—
choose to turn off the tv or the computer and turn to each other in conversation.
choose to put a little less in an IRA and give the money instead to Bread for the World or even First United.
choose to forgo a Sunday soccer game to come to church to be walk though the Jesus stories in Lent.

In other words, fasting calls us to give up some of the clutter in our life to make space for God to work in us. My son often talks about the value of sports trades in terms of addition-by-subtraction. I finally learned the phrase means that a team can get better by just getting rid of a player who's a drag on the team. Fasting is a spiritual addition-by-subtraction: when we get rid of the stuff that sucks away our time and spirit, we get a little closer to what we could be, a little closer to our God-self.

The six weeks of Lent is not enough time to get this down. It takes a lifetime. It's why the church gives us the gift of Lent every year to consider what is it each one of us plans to do with our one wild and precious life. Lent reels us back in and calls us back to Jesus as a traveling companion and guide on this our life's journey. Lent asks us to de-clutter our lives, clean off our life's windshields and focus on the North Star of Jesus Christ to set our path and our life.

Every year the church calendar gives us Lent to reflect on our life. Every year we get Lent to walk with Jesus from Jerusalem to Calvary and eventually to the empty tomb and shape our life more as he shaped his, to belong more to God and less to a culture that sucks us dry.

Remember human you are dust and to dust you shall return.

We begin with dust.

We end with ashes.

What will do in the meantime?

Whose will we be in the meantime?