

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Dr. Simon Mainwaring

Gospel Reading: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

14 February, 2018



So, we did it; and no one got arrested, which was good. 'Ashes to Go'. Something new; for us at All Saints', at least. Something a little out of the comfort zone - both in terms of body temperature and in terms of being exposed a little to the general public beyond these beautiful church walls. About fifty people received ashes and a prayer, and a hundred or so more were offered the same, but declined, and several hundred more saw, and swerved or accelerated, or doggedly looked down, or up, or anywhere to pretend that there weren't Episcopalians in cassocks and stoles offering to make ash crosses on their foreheads as they made their way to work this morning.

As I watched folks come and go, I was reminded of how thoroughly a living contradiction we human beings are. Dressed to impress, but so many of us not at all at home in our own skin. Bodies all in a rush to get from A to B, when often all that our souls are crying out for is the chance to stop, and breathe, and live. Made for relationship, yet tethered to devices and customized experiences that edit out the world at will. We are living in two directions at once; and it's a miracle we are still in one piece in this modern race to the front and to the bottom all at the same time.

That is where we stood. In a liminal kind of space, between departure and arrival, between home and work, between the church and the corporate cathedral of Bank of America - we stood, and offered a smile, a gentle invitation, and a subversive proclamation that these walking and breathing paradoxes of human life are simply dust, of the earth, and recipients of a divine and eternal hope; fragile, beautiful, wonderfully made, and loved from beginning to end.

Of course, that subversive proclamation is why we went to all that trouble. For the work of the Church requires of us to be willing to step beyond our comfort and into spaces where the church's power and standing is far from certain. The formula is really pretty simple: if they are not coming to us; then we need to go find them - no matter what it takes, no matter how awkward it feels, or how often we experience being rejected, or derided, or ignored; that is the Church's calling: to tell the world that it is loved by God.

Telling, though, is just the beginning; and you are not here tonight merely to be told something. You are here to do something. If the message of love is something we extended to commuters today that asks if people are content living with the paradox between the beauty of their inner person and the struggle of their outer self to realize that beauty, then our work tonight is to take the next step; the one that follows the message, and explore what we might do with our embodied contradiction once we come to see that we are living in it - which is one of the reasons why we fast.

The idea of fasting is an ancient biblical practice, and indeed a practice from Hinduism that predates both Christianity and Judaism, that has retained such a sustained presence in religious behavior for an array of reasons, one of which, I believe, is because fasting allows us to gain a greater appreciation of what we value. Yet we have to get out fasting in good order, because the fast is not about what we are not taking in as much as it is about what we are giving out.

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The passage that we heard from Isaiah this evening talks about how a religious practice of fasting that is incongruous with the rest of our living, simply negates itself. We cannot fast from food but feed our own interests. We cannot withdraw from providing for the needs of our bodies and yet remain hostile to the needs of the world. Religion will do nothing for us - seen or unseen - if it does not enable us to see the paradoxes of our lives and unbind ourselves from them.

Fasting through Lent offers us a chance to re-orient who we are. What might it be like to fast from those behaviors and ways of relating, the mindsets and our tried and tested reactions and defensive responses to conflict and stress, and live into a greater freedom? Lent is not truly the invitation to stop as it is to start; it is not to place a limit but to realize that beyond the boundaries that we have established for the pattern of our living lies a vast expanse of possibility, a freedom in Christ whose border lines we will never reach, for grace has no limits, and our potential for transformation is as infinite as the God who transforms us.

If you are thirsty, what might it be like to finally drink? If you are broken, what might it be like to finally know healing? If you are lost, what might it be like to finally come home? These are the missional questions of the church; questions we simply must ask one another as we claim a block of these city streets in the name of a Savior who got so far out of the divine comfort zone that he was willing to die for it?

The gospel admonition to practice piety and alms unseen is a reminder to you and I, as the religious, not to avoid being outward facing with our lives of faith but to avoid making an emblem of our religion, as if religion might somehow allow us to bypass our need for radical honesty and the facing of our own embodied paradox. To become the righteousness of God, as Paul invites his Christ-followers in Corinth to be, to finally let go of our tussle with contradiction, is to find that border line of grace in the heart of our own lives, and cross it, over to the other side, to become, as the Christ we follow, exposed, vulnerable, seen as we truly are before the world; to be a vessel of God's glory - a human being fully alive.

Live into the gift of Lent. You are fragile, and beautiful, and wonderful too; for you are loved from the beginning to the end of everything. Cross over the line into the freedom of the wilderness and live.

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