

Malcolm Clemens Young  
6:10

2 Corinthians 5:20-

Grace Cathedral, San Francisco CA Z9

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday The Vine – Eucharist & Imposition of Ashes

Wednesday 6 March 2019 Two homilies (one following each reading)

### **Life in Ashes**

*"We are treated as impostors, and yet are true... as having nothing, and yet possessing everything" (2 Cor. 6).*

"God does not need our worship. We worship to enlarge our sense of the holy, so that we can feel and know the presence of the Lord, who is with us always." Marilynne Robinson wrote this in her book *Home*. She goes on, "Love is what it amounts to, a loftier love, and pleasure in a loving presence."<sup>1</sup>

We cannot forget this pleasure in God even on Ash Wednesday, even as we wear the sign of our own mortality, a cross made of ashes on our forehead. Every year on this day I feel expanded by wonder in the presence of God.

Have you ever told someone that they were dying? Perhaps you are a doctor, or you had to share this news with a family member. To most of us this sounds terrifying. Clergy do something like this every Ash Wednesday. We put a cross of ashes on tiny infants who will live into the next century, and on old friends who will die this year. To everyone we say the same thing, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." This experience changes who we are as people.

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) was disgusted by the superficiality of modern consumer culture.<sup>2</sup> He warned that shallow advertising jingles and the stories imposed by corporate Hollywood displace our true selves. We internalize these voices which he called "the They." "The They" disorient us and keep us at a distance from reality. "The They" distract us from acting decisively. To use religious language these voices lead us to forget that we are children of God.

Heidegger's solution to this problem was what he called "being-towards-death." By staying conscious of our own finitude we can see the truth and live in a more authentic way. Ash Wednesday functions a little like this but Jesus offers much more.

"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Every part of Jesus's teaching changes the meaning of that statement. In his world, the Realm of God, instead of scaring us these words remind us of the dignity of every person. Every life is infinitely

precious and nothing quite like us will ever come into being again. This can give us a remarkable power.

The Apostle Paul murdered Christians. Then the light blinded him on the road to Damascus and he heard Jesus. It changed him forever. Paul says, "We entreat you on behalf of Christ to be reconciled to God... so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5). He experienced what it feels like to be "in Christ" and we can too. In Paul's case it often meant that everything was the opposite of what it seemed to be.

"We are treated as impostors and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see, - we are alive... as sorrowful and yet always rejoicing, as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything" (1 Cor. 6).

In January John Philip Newell preached here. He tells a story about his father, a fundamentalist minister with a narrow view of God.<sup>3</sup> His father's ministry involved helping a Muslim couple from Bosnia named Sylvia and Boshe to find sanctuary in Canada. Years later as he declined into dementia they frequently visited him.

As a younger man Newell's dad helped immigrants but he believed that they would be better off if they became Christian. Newell says, "In other words, his religious ego was pretty big." But as death drew nearer Newell saw this religious ego dissolving.

His father enjoyed praying with those who visited him. As he began to lose the ability to find words in normal conversation he was somehow better at talking to God. One summer afternoon with the light filtering through the maple trees Newell asked his father to pray. Sitting in a circle they held hands. And this is what his father said. "Without You, O God, we would not be. And because of You we are one family." As he said this tears were streaming down the faces of Sylvia and Moshe. Everyone understood what had happened. Everyone finally belonged together.

As Newell's father approached death he came closer to really being in Christ. In his hymn "The Canticle of the Sun" St. Francis of Assisi praises Sister Death. In God we no longer need to fear our death. She comes to all of us. She takes away our ego and our illusion of separateness. She closes the distance that separates us from God.

Remember that you are dust. But do not let the pressure of modern life displace your true self. Live in Christ, at peace with Sister Death. And always take pleasure in the loving presence of the Holy One.

## A Hidden Treasure

*"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Mt. 6).*

How can we read the Bible both in a non-fundamentalist way and as the Word of God? How can we move beyond treating scripture as a simplistic rulebook for daily living and allow God to transform us through these words? Where is our treasure?

Jesus speaks at length from the mountaintop about how we are to live. He extends the ancient law that prohibits murder and teaches that we should not even commit murder in our hearts (Mt. 5:21). Rather than merely loving our neighbor he encourages us to love our enemy also and to pray for those who persecute us (Mt. 5:44).

How we practice our faith is part of this too. Speaking to a society that revered holy people Jesus teaches them to keep their faith hidden. He says that we should act in secret when we give money to the poor, or pray, or fast.

For years it struck me as ironic that we all hear this instruction on Ash Wednesday and then wear our ashes proudly for the rest of the day. I guess this question hinges on whether we think that people admire us for wearing our ashes, or if it just looks weird or alienating to them, or if it is simply a way to make a gentle statement about what we believe. This morning, a half hour conversation with two new friends began with my question, "where did you get your ashes?"

I know old priests who have a settled interpretation of particular recurring passages from scripture. Over the years I have begun to have an opinion about this one. For me Jesus is talking about the great pleasure of losing our self and doing something for its own sake.

So much of our modern, rationalistic society is about setting goals and achieving them. We do things because they will help us get ahead, or are good for us, or shine on our resume. We are generally friendly to people around us because they might be able to help us some time in the future.

For Jesus this whole approach to life is a mistake. Love stops being love when we do it for an ulterior motive. Faith ceases to be faith when we think only of what God might do for us. We forget to simply enjoy and love God. We exist to receive God's gifts and to share them.

That's part of the attraction of surfing for me. On the surface a grown man riding waves to shore may seem utterly useless and ridiculous. But being surrounded by the natural world, experiencing God's gratuitous love reminds me why we exist.

On Ash Wednesday Jesus asks us to be honest about where our treasure is. We answer this question in different ways every day. You may be feeling a sense of financial insecurity and this is simple for you – treasure is treasure, or what we usually call cash. For twenty years every tax season while the people around me were dutifully saving for college, I lived in a state of low level anxiety, worried that we wouldn't have enough money to pay our bills.

Our addictions are a kind of strange treasure to us. Perhaps these days your treasure looks like a craving for love from a particular person. That could be a family member, a teacher, a love interest, someone at work. Many of us are still trying to impress our parents even long after they have died. You might feel a need for people in general to respect you, to think you are cool or successful or competent or friendly – and that is your treasure.

As our children leave for college I am realizing how much of my life is wrapped up in them. For years I have regarded myself primarily as a parent. What will be left of me when they are gone?

Most often the treasure is our ego, that fragile, needy, damaged sense of our self. In response to this Jesus says invites us to share a meal with each other and to simply receive the infinite treasure of God.

Our treasure is not in a bank. It cannot be taxed away by a government. It does not depend on anyone else's opinion about us. Our treasure is not in a book. Our treasure is in the abiding love of the one who created us. May God bless you with the spirit of Christ during this holy season.

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<sup>1</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *Home* (NY: Picador, 2008) 110.

<sup>2</sup> Ash Wednesday (2-17-10). Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (NY: Harper & Row, 1962).

<sup>3</sup> John Philip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings* (Vermont: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2014) 54-55.