

**Ash Wednesday**

**Matthew 6.1-6, ff**

**Wednesday, March 1, 2017**

The spacious rolling hills of southeastern Minnesota create a distinct agricultural tapestry during the spring planting season. Sections of turned earth become the rich, black, loam squares offset by the lighter fallow acres of a flowing checkerboard of fields that roll on for miles. It was near the edge of one of these plowed fields that I witnessed an early cropland communion. The encounter occurred in the mid 1980's. The wars in Central America were at their peak. Some refugees from Guatemala had been resettled in the tiny farming community in which I worked. As a part of the efforts to resettle these families, local farmers and church members collaborated to support the various needs of the refugees.

During one outing, a large group was talking near the sheds on the farm where we gathered. Looking out across a recently plowed field, the fresh, brown earth stretched out and uphill to kiss the horizon. In the foreground, two men--the farm's owner and one of the refugees--squatted in the corner of the field. Their communion was not the bread and wine variety that we experience, nor were they speaking so that they might connect. Rather, they participated in one of the timeless rituals that bind us to the earth and one another. Casually, but with a reverence cultivated over years of living off of the earth, they grabbed clumps of dirt, crumbled it in their hands, and watched the soil slip through their fingers back to its home.

Nothing was said. Nothing needed to be said. The barriers of language, culture, and experience dissolved as did the earth between their fingers. In that moment, they were brothers. The earth connected them and bound them to one another in a way that few things might. For that moment, they communed. Not eating or drinking, but drawing forth the earth, allowing it to return as rhythmic as the breath that they breathed. They were one with each other. They were one with the earth. Connected. Accountable. Compelled to recognize the complex truth that bound them in that moment: Mortality and Grace.

Which is what permeates our gathering this evening as well: Mortality and Grace. This Ash Wednesday, we echo the exhortation that has marked us as sure as the ash that traces our brows. “Remember that you are dust. And to dust you shall return.” We need not make a show of our actions here. Indeed, Jesus in Matthew’s gospel, directs us precisely *not* to make a show of it. Nor is our gathering a macabre fascination with death, a fixation on the end of life. Rather, our actions help our bones to settle more fully into the lives that we have been given. We need not run away from the truth, nor do we need to fetishize it. We simply and succinctly express what is: Remembering our limits, we are opened to the life that is sheer gift.

And such remembering, poignantly, is the heart of our Eucharistic celebration. Limits that open us to life. Communion, in this instance, moves us off of the fields of our lives to the table where simple elements of the earth--bread and wine--become seeds that sow our connection to the Holy, and to each other, and to the earth we have been given. While the ancient incantation, “Given for you,”

rings in our ear, the practice transcends this moment and time itself. We are not alone, nor are we our own. We are lost and found in God. And our brotherhood and sisterhood extends beyond race, class, gender, and national boundaries. While we receive grace in this holy meal, we also receive a glimpse of the foretaste of the feast to come, where we are none other than our brothers' and sisters' keepers. Bread crumbles in our hand. Melts in our mouth. Wine taints the edge of our bread, or coolly eases down our throat. We need not speak, for there is nothing to say. Nothing needs to be said. This act that reminds us of the death of our Lord is also the sign of our connection to his death--and our own death--to be, as the baptismal rite promises us, "buried with Christ in his death. That we share in his resurrection"

Thus, the perspective we glean from our actions here, from the Lenten season we now enter, and throughout the days that we are given is nothing less than the holiness of our lives and the holiness of all that is. We are not amassing points to please some divine bean counter by our actions here. Rather, we continue the story of God present in, with, through, under, and above not just the elements of bread and wine, but the pew we sit on, the flesh of the other near us, the street we arrived on, the passersby we met as we rushed in, the fold of the page in our bulletin, the bite we quickly ate to get here, the home to which we return, and the dawn to usher in a new a day. And everything in between. The implications are profound. God not just located in specific settings or only beyond us. Rather, God present in the very midst of life, our life, permeating life. Thus, our task, in part, is the perennial search to recognize the footprints and handprints and breath of God that continually meet us.

Recently, I spoke with two nuns about the possibility of sharing a worship space. Initially, they rejected the idea out of hand, for there was no tabernacle. When I assured them that, indeed, we had a reserve sacrament, their eyes danced. As I stood outside of the sanctuary, they made their way in to pray. They genuflected, and then they expressed a devotion to the sacrament I had rarely witnessed. In their mind, Jesus was in the room. And their reverence was palpable. While they practiced a specific piety that we may not share, what they expressed was a deep understanding of the Holy present for and with us in the simplest forms that we can find in life. Here it was bread. The question for us is where else?

Where else do we see the Holy? Where else does the divine meet us? When else are we standing on holy ground? Perhaps, the charge for us this Lenten season and for the rest of our lives is to exercise our minds and hearts and souls so that we more readily see the Holy in front us. Look for God in the most simple and mundane of moments. Search for the divine moving incognito in the presence of those whom we may least expect. Find the holy hidden in the guise of the other. And think about what the world looks like from this perspective. What might this view mean for how we treat the new refugees in our midst? How do we think about what is just and right not only for those within our immediate circle but for those who are on the margins, those who were born with two strikes against them, those who also bear to us the presence of God? What we may discover as we consider our mortality and grace, is that every moment is an opportunity for communion. We are connected to each other. Connected to the earth. Connected to God. We need not compartmentalize life. Sacred here. Secular there. Holy

now. Banal later. The divine is in it all. Here. Now. Always. There is nothing more to say. Indeed, nothing needs to be said.