
ASHES FOR OTHERS

ISAIAH 58:1-12

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON ASH WEDNESDAY, MARCH 2, 2022,
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It is Ash Wednesday and I'm in mourning. That would seem appropriate for this liturgical occasion, especially when historically ashes were a sign of mourning. But I'm mourning not necessarily for what you think. I'm mourning because we've gotten Ash Wednesday all wrong. We've gotten the ashes all wrong. We lie in our sackcloth and ashes and humble ourselves, wake up early in the morning for daily devotional time, listen to sermon podcasts, attend small group bible studies, give up things for Lent, and even practice fasting, but God still does not necessarily see, according to Isaiah, because even our practices, no matter how faithful or right, do not guarantee God's presence. We can go through all of the holy motions to kick off Lent, and God still not notice. Why?

Because so often our ashes can be ones of self-absorption. We've made ashes about individual spirituality or piety and individual sin and individual penitence and by doing so, have placed our individual selves at the center of the spiritual universe with our self-interests. We've made the ashes about us. So I'm mourning because this selfish individualism--cloaked in faith-- needs a Holy Spirit exorcism. Without the Spirit, our ashes become ashes of war as we enact violence on others even while grandmother wisdom tells us "no one ever wins a fight."

God tells Israel, on your fast day, you "oppress all your workers and fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist." Right ritual practice does not mean a righteous social ethic. The 'churchy' people fast, yet they're the ones who've created the social breach and chasms. If we want to give up anything this Lent, perhaps we need to give up selfishness and words or acts of violence. I'm mourning the ways we can delight in God and still despise our neighbor. We can wear our ashes or sit in them and still wreak war on others.

That's because we've gotten the ashes all wrong. But God wants us to see them rightly today. Ashes are not really about our individual lives. Ashes are a visual sign of our commitment to, honor of, and care for others, a sign of our collective humanity and mortality, a sign on our foreheads that speaks to others and reads like Hezekiah Walker's gospel song, "I need you to survive." These are the ashes God sees and honors. Why do I say this? Well listen to God: "Is not this the fast I choose? to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?" God redefines the spiritual practice of fasting and reveals its social and communal orientation and action. We don't fast in order to feast on one another; we fast to meet one another in our struggle.

The ashes of God's fast are for the liberation and freedom of others. These ashes are for nonviolence, love and hospitality. And in the ashes of this fast, there is a promise. The promise is that the One who created ashes in the first place, will be present. When you follow this fast and apply these ashes to your life or forehead, God will say, 'Here I am. I'm in the ashes, the collective ash heap of humanity, especially the ashes of human despair with the oppressed, those yoked by injustice, the hungry, the homeless, the naked, those grieving the death of loved ones, or those whose land is attacked and destroyed by a power-hungry, violent, wicked neighbor. Here I am in your fragile ashes.'

God is among the ashes of this social/communal-oriented fast. The delicate ashes of Ash Wednesday are about our deep need for God and through an encounter with God, we encounter, commit to, and care for each other. These ashes that have been burned by the flame of God do not disappear because as they return to the soil, they are the seeds of healing and hope for the future. When we care for each other as God's fast calls us to do, we will begin to see healing in our lives and land. When ashes are not only about our individual lives but the human community, the work of repair and restoration will begin. Even the damage we might have caused, knowingly or unknowingly, by only focusing on self-interests will not install an eternal curse if we see the ash heap of human life as a mound of hope for what God is rebuilding among us, through us, and for us.

The ashes not only promise God's presence but promise that the ruins of our ecclesial, social, and political life will be rebuilt into something more beautiful, into a real human community, true communion, where the breach will be bridged, hurts will be healed, hate in the streets will turn to love, and we'll study war no more. Hope is in these ashes, turning my mourning into dancing.

The ashes of God's fast are from the fire of God's Spirit marked on our lives to do repair and be agents of healing and restoration of everything that has been ruined. May our ashes burn with the same heartfelt commitment to others that Jesus Christ has toward us.