

The Reverend Beth Lind Foote
Ash Wednesday
February 13, 2013
Joel 2: 1-2, 12-17
Psalm 103
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, our Lord and our Redeemer. Amen.

I live in a house that's the same vintage as our Montgomery House here on campus. Over the years we've done a lot of work on it--- our painting contractor has returned once again, this time to work on the master bedroom. He's scraped off layers and layers of wallpaper, revealing the original floral pattern from 1917, all to prepare the surface for something fresh and new.

Today on Ash Wednesday we are invited to do some renovation of our inner spiritual houses, and allow God to scrape down through the layers of self-image and convention to the original God-created You. In a few minutes we will impose ashes with those sober words, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

This ritual gently reminds us that we are dusty, mortal creatures, made of earth, with a limited shelf life. It helps create a fresh surface in us, so we can be ready for our Lenten journey.

When I was about to be ordained, our crop of ordinands went on a retreat with Bishop Marc. A couple of things stuck with me: He said it takes about seven years to grow into being a priest, and that we need to continually clarify our intentions. Why am I doing what I'm doing? Where is God in my life? Is my intention to glorify God or to glorify me? I think this is true for all of us, not just clergy.

In our reading from Matthew today, I think Jesus is saying a similar thing. Like all faithful Jews, Jesus assumes that everyone will pray, fast, and give alms to the poor. Jesus talks about all three practices and outlines how not to do them, and then how to do them. He describes a way of relating to God that is authentic and

humble. But it's not so much about a right and wrong way as much as describing an attitude towards practicing these core religious practices. When he says, "But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you", he's modeling a way to seamlessly integrate faith into our daily life.

It's tempting to interpret this as you shouldn't pray if you don't know what you're doing, or you shouldn't fast if you can't do it right, or give alms if you're not genuinely generous. I think Jesus wants us to enter into these practices even if we don't fully know why we do them, or how to do them. And I think he's saying, "examine your intentions. Look at your relationship with God, and with me." He invites us to distance ourselves from the world of materialism and outward appearance. He invites us to cultivate a quiet mind and move closer. Jesus says, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." In quiet contemplation, we can

enter that place where our treasure lies---where our heartbeat begins to beat with the same rhythm as the heart of God.

These ashes are highly symbolic. We see in them a shadow of what's left after something has been consumed by fire. They are made from the palms of last Palm Sunday. Ashes are a symbol of our mortality, and they help us shed our illusion that we will not die. They are much like the ashes of our beloved saints interred in the Memorial Garden. It's said that Ashes are made of the same elements as the stars, and, being creatures of God's universe, we are made of the same elements. Ashes are also symbols of a cleared space, ready for transformation: after a forest fire the ashes that remain are fertile ground for new growth.

We need to add water for new growth to begin. In the waters of Baptism, we enter the new life of Christ. The tradition of Lent began in the early church as a time for new Christians to prepare

for the full emersion of Baptism at the Easter Vigil. Like them, we take these weeks to prepare ourselves for meeting the Risen Christ once again, at Easter. To do that, we are invited to let go of what binds us and what weighs us down.

This Lent at Trinity we are using the images of the Bucket and the Well as themes for our Pilgrimage to Easter. The bucket is a way of imagining how we can empty ourselves of what separates us from God. Each week we will stop at a well, let down our bucket, and pull it up filled with Spiritual Refreshment.

When you were baptized, the priest anointed you with holy oil on your forehead in the shape of a cross, and marked you as Christ's own forever. Today, these ashes will make that cross visible again. You are marked you as a pilgrim, ready for the journey of a Holy Lent.

Amen.