

“Ashes and Stardust”

Isaiah 58.1–12 and Matthew 6.1–6

The Rev. Hal Chorprenning, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, Ash Wednesday 2006

Penitence is not a new word in the lexicon of Christian dogma, but it may be a new term that we in the progressive wing of the church still need to incorporate into our vocabulary of faith. Some of you may have heard about a group of Roman Catholic laymen (and it's only men) called Los Hermanos Penitentes, which is active not only in Latin America, but also in New Mexico and Colorado. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, “The Hermanos Penitentes are a society of individuals, who, to atone for their sins, practice penances which consist principally of flagellation, carrying heavy crosses, binding the body to a cross, and tying the limbs to hinder the circulation of the blood. These practices have prevailed in Colorado and New Mexico since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Up to the year 1890, they were public; at present they are secret, though not strictly.”¹

And now you may be wondering why I'm trying to insert penitence into our vocabulary!

But, it's not just Roman Catholics who have a fairly dim view of human nature. Listen to these words from a fellow Congregationalist and Calvinist: “You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder; and you have no interest in any Mediator, and nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do, to induce to spare you one moment.” Those are the words of Jonathan Edwards from his famous 1741 sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”² So why bother with being penitent? Edwards would certainly be incredulous at the idea of Congregationalists with ashes on their foreheads. After all, you're either elect or damned and since it's predestined, there isn't anything you can do about it. 260 years later, that rather cheery idea of human nature isn't consistent with my faith.

Now I'll bet you're really wondering why I'm interested in penitence at all.



Penitence is an aftereffect of having an experience of humility. When we see ourselves in true perspective – warts and all – we are able to observe the damage that we've caused in others' lives and in our own. We ask for forgiveness from the person or persons we've harmed, and we also ask for God's forgiveness. And sometimes we are called upon to make things right by restoring an imbalance we've caused, whether it's by replacing the window you've broken with an ill-aimed baseball or making amends for saying something hurtful and finding ways to repair the emotional damage you've caused.

You'll notice that I'm not talking about flagellating yourself, either literally or metaphorically, and I'm not referring to any inherent evil that lurks within the human breast. The reality is that people do commit grievous sin. When I say sin, I'm not talking

¹ see the Catholic Encyclopedia online at www.newadvent.org and see “penitents.”

² “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” in Jonathan Edwards: Basic Writings, ed. Ola Elizabeth Winslow. (NY: Meridian, 1966), p. 160.

about running red lights or even saying a nasty word when you get pulled over. I'm referring to greed, violence, hatred, idolatry, injustice, and self-deception, to name a few. And the reason sin occurs is because we misperceive ourselves. We see ourselves as threatened – by the prospect of disease, financial insecurity, losing the upper hand.

Healthcare, shelter, and food are basic needs, but when our pursuit of self-interest gets out of balance, we fall into a state of sin. When I can comfortably sit down at the breakfast table and drink my coffee and scan the newspaper and enjoy a nice breakfast when I know there are kids in Fort Collins who don't have any breakfast at all, that's sin. I am able to deceive myself either by ignoring the situation or by compartmentalizing it, so that I don't have to think about it.

It isn't that I shouldn't have a nice breakfast: it's that others should, too. And if I can do something about it, whether it's influencing government food programs for kids or causing a stir with the school board and city council, then I should be doing it.

How many of us have a lot more than we need? How many of us have an education and perhaps a position of influence in this community? So, what do we do about it? We can't do everything, but we can do something.



One of the things I love about this community of faith is that we have a LOT of people doing a LOT of something. I don't need to run through the litany of things, but I see a lot of ways that people at Plymouth are changing others' lives for the better.

The ashes that we wear on our foreheads are not a symbol of self-righteousness or a symbol of self-hatred. I hope they are a symbol of seeing ourselves with a clear lens, for all our faults and our gifts and talents.

“What are human beings that you are mindful of them,” asks the psalmist. What are “mortals that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than angels, and crowned them with glory and honor.”³ That's a different view of humanity than simply being sinners in the hands of an angry God. Clearly, the biblical record suggests that we aren't all bad as a species.

A couple of times a year, Jean and I take our boys down to the Museum of Science and Nature in Denver, and we recently saw an incredible planetarium program about the origins of the universe. It was one of the most awe-inspiring things I've seen in years. And one of the miraculous things that I learned was that we are literally made of stardust. Our wonderful human bodies are made of matter that once was a star. Perhaps on a scientific level, that isn't terribly exciting, but on a metaphoric level, it's mind-blowing. We have the Genesis story of Adam being created from earth, and we have the scientific story of humanity being created from the stars. Think about that as I read something to you:

“The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.” Those words were written by Paul the apostle to the church in Corinth nearly 2,000 years ago.⁴

³ Psalm 8.4–5

⁴ I Corinthians 15. 47–49

We are beings who can perpetrate the Holocaust, and we are beings who will sacrifice our lives for others. We are greedy SOBs looking out for number one, and we are those who give and give even when our cup is empty.

During this season of Lent, may we remember to keep our feet on the ground, as we walk the 40 days of inward searching, and may we keep our eyes on the stars, looking to follow the way of the Christ. Amen.