



“Embers in Ashes”

a sermon by

Kathleen A. Crowe

First Presbyterian Church
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Over the past weeks we have been looking at the humanity of some of the Biblical figures of the Bible. As we turn the corner to the season of Lent, we take up the words of the apostle Paul, who shares a great deal of honesty about the struggles he faced within his own discipleship- even to the point of holding a bit of a pity party before the Corinthians. Our reading comes from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 4:7-18. The treasure that he will refer to is the knowledge of God's glory in Christ. Hear the Word of God: "But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture- "I believed, and so I spoke"- we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal."

Today is Ash Wednesday, the official beginning of Lent. Actually, if we were in New Orleans, yesterday, Fat Tuesday or Mardi Gras- the high holy day of gluttony, would have been the official kickoff to the liturgical season- with signs of the faith today taking the form of a ritual ingesting of extra strength Tylenol and Tums. The idea, of course, being that one has to squeeze in every possible vice before the period of fasting and repentance that, for many characterizes Lent. It is thought of as a means of getting it out of one's system before trying to put one's best, and most disciplined foot forward before God. I'll admit, even though I have participated in an Ash Wednesday service every year for as long as I can remember, as a good Presbyterian, I was never very good at observing the Lenten practice of giving something up in the weeks before Easter- I think I aimed to high with such lofty expectations as abstinence from desserts or chocolate- two totally separate things, of course. The season proved typically to draw out more of my own failings in the realm of spiritual disciplines and a feeling of hopelessness so I usually gave up the effort after about week one, though I was always more than happy to chime in at the Easter celebrations, reaping the joy of the resurrection without first really standing at the foot of the cross. Celebrating the fact that I was forgiven and redeemed, without ever really considering the fact that I was sinful and broken in the first place. But this notion of giving pause along the road to Jerusalem- a season of space before the empty cross, before the birth of the new church through the flames of Pentecost, before Calvary, before the disciples are left staring upwards into the sky with mouths dropped open, giving pause to recall our sinfulness and God's grace, to recall why this all happened in the first place is just what Paul takes up in this text, and is exactly what this Ash Wednesday is all about.

Paul writes, "But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." We know something about clay jars, these earthen vessels, ourselves don't we? Through the lens of scripture we have gazed

over the shoulder of the potter at work at his wheel in Genesis 2, “Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.” Psalm 103, “For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.” We ourselves are these very clay jars- molded from the earth, filled with sediment and imperfection, created not as something that is to be invincible, but vulnerable to being broken if it falls, an outer nature that is being wasted away by time and trial and sin. It is no coincidence that throughout the Old Testament figures such as Job and the prophets clothe themselves in sackcloth and cover themselves with ashes when interceding for themselves or others because it is a symbol of their dustiness- of mortality- a recognition of their utter reliance upon God from whom all life sprang forth and to whom all life will return. It is a statement about God’s sovereignty and human fragility as earthen vessels, a reminder that the extraordinary power of provision for our needs, provision for our sin indeed belongs to God and does not come from us. When we try so hard to put our best foot forward for God to somehow leverage God into granting more goodness, when we try and hold some invisible standard or bottom line for our faith and our Christian walk, when we reign ourselves to shame and self-loathing upon ourselves when our attempts at Lenten disciplines start to resemble half-hearted new year’s resolutions Paul puts us back in our place. “But we have this treasure in clay jars” he writes. None of it comes from us. And though we often feel more like something that might be found in the kiln of a Kindergarten pottery class than a museum, we were nonetheless crafted by God, called forth from dust, and in that state we are perfected not because of who we are, but because of who God is.

Contrary to anything we could imagine, rather than being considered worthless as dust in light of God’s power it is these very same imperfect earthy vessels that are entrusted to hold the treasure of God’s glory. Because God clothed himself with sin, covered himself in the ashes of our mortality and tasted death so that our imperfections might be made perfect in God’s eyes. This is both the hard truth and the good news of Lent. For when we give pause before Easter to recall why we even stand at the cross, when we take a difficult look within ourselves and recognize that we have no best foot to put forward before God, that we are subject to corruption and decay, to passions we can’t control, to vices we succumb to, to resolutions we cannot keep, to disciplines we can’t make time for, when we recall the times we have neglected our neighbor or ourselves, when we have sacrificed our integrity or ignored our inner voice, it is only then that we come to truly appreciate what it means that our own flesh and faltering was taken on by Jesus and by the hand of God was sculpted into the very basis of hope and life.¹ It is when we see that we ourselves merit only a mound of ashes and the dust to which we will return that we can grasp the awesome reality of Christ taking on flesh so that we might be given eternal life. It is only after we offer confession that we might truly grasp forgiveness and begin to get our minds around what it means to have Christ resurrected, when it seemed that all had been consumed by sin and unworthiness, to have Christ in us like an ember in ashes. A priceless treasure in an earthen vessel fanned by faith.

Treehugger.com reports that researchers for Motorola have created a prototype cellular phone casing that is made of a type of biodegradable plastic, which comes with a sunflower seed that is embedded within it, and viewable through a capsule in the phone. When the phone is discarded the seed is released after the casing breaks down, and with it an enzyme that serves as a

¹ *New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 11, Nashville, Abingdon, 2000, p. 88

nutrient for the seed as it grows into a sunflower. While this is surely shameless marketing to a guilty consumer conscience at its best it is also perhaps a peculiar modern-day illustration of what Paul is talking about, of what this day is all about. It is with an honest and sober look at ourselves in the weeks ahead that we might proclaim the truth of Easter Sunday that even though our outer nature is failing us, our inner nature is being renewed day by day not in spite of our imperfections or decay, but because of them and this, finally, is a cause for celebration.

Ash Wednesday does not belong to any one denomination or tradition, though it is observed more by some than others. Receiving the sign of the cross isn't a sacrament though the tradition of marking oneself with ashes is as ancient as the scriptures themselves because we only got about 2 weeks into the creation before we discovered our infinite capacity to mess things up and God's infinite capacity to love us anyway. This is a day set aside to recall such things as the fact that our time on this earth is passing every moment but we do not need to be afraid. That no building of a temple or mastery of the law or even a marking of ashes can save us but by grace alone will we drink from the cup of salvation. This is a day set apart to recall that finding favor in the eyes of God does not mean putting our best foot forward, it means being our most authentic self before God not so that he might draw closer to us, but that we might draw closer to him. Today we offer a liturgy of confession as the first step along the Lenten road to Jerusalem, and for those who would like to come forward after the prayer, we will have ashes available and will make the sign of the cross on your forehead as a reminder that from dust we came and to dust we will return. God does not ask us to be any more or any less than what we are. We are nothing more than fallen sinners, we are nothing less than God's own creation and bearers of the image of Christ. And so begins this holy season when we look for the visible signs of the work of the invisible grace within as God continues to shape us as a potter at work at the wheel. For even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot, for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal."