

Treasure in the Ashes

Ash Wednesday
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Wednesday, February 17, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. How many years now I have stood in some worship space somewhere and said those words while dabbing a forehead with ashes, forming them into the shape of a cross? I find that some parishioners come forward smiling at me, or I at them. Which seems strangely foolish, since what I am saying to them as I apply the ashes is, basically, "Remember that you are mortal. Remember death." On Ash Wednesday, the Church has traditionally dabbled those cruciform ashes and pronounced those words as an act of humility before our immortal and almighty God. It is difficult to fully appreciate such a ritual, except that Holy Scripture, once again, brings clarity to it. What does Jesus say as our Gospel lesson draws to a close? *Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

There is much we treasure in this life, much we are drawn to in temptation, much we attempt to hoard and keep for ourselves. The ashes remind us—bluntly—that we cannot take those things with us. The ashes remind us that often, the things we treasure are fleeting and fading, superficial and inconsequential in the big scheme of things. And we need those ashes to be so blunt in order to remind us of this.

Rodney Clapp, in his book *Tortured Wonders*, tells of a drop-dead gorgeous woman who walked into St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church in New York City one Ash Wednesday morning. Impeccably and fashionably dressed, even for sophisticated city life, the woman came forward and knelt at the altar. She was visibly nervous, and as the priest drew near, he realized she wanted to say something to him. So he leaned a little further forward to trace the ashen cross on her brow, and she whispered: "Father, I am a model. I know I only have a few years, then I will be too old for this work. My body is aging, and I can hardly admit it to myself. But once a year I **do** admit it—at this service. So rub the ashes on. Rub them **hard**."

Her sheer beauty could well have been her treasure. It was, in a very real way, her identity, at least to the world around her. It was her bread and butter, the reason cameras flashed before her eyes, perhaps the first thing anyone ever noticed about her. And she knew it. And she knew it wouldn't last. And because she knew it wouldn't last, the ashes rubbed on her forehead once a year kept her grounded in something bigger and more real and more lasting than her modeling career or beautiful face and figure. The ashes kept her grounded in her ultimate reliance on God—in life and in death.

Her poignant words and humble, kneeling figure are such a contrast to the religious leaders Jesus described in our Gospel. They treasured **their** status, their being known and being noticed. Looking humble and penitent and religious was part of their identity in front of the masses, their bread and butter, the first thing others would notice about them. Their "spiritual practices," however, had little to do with reverence for God, being faithful to God, giving glory to God. In fact, Jesus called these religious leaders "hypocrites"—and here he was using the word for "actors." For that was what they were. They only acted as if they were humble and penitent

and religious. It was all pretend, all show, all superficiality. They didn't rely on God in life and in death—they only relied on their ability to act the part. They didn't treasure God's mercy and wisdom and love, the eternal riches of His kingdom—they only treasured the accolades from the crowds.

I think the gorgeous model **knew** her real treasure. I think she sought that treasure out—not on Christmas Eve with the baby Jesus in the manger. Not on Easter Sunday with the empty tomb and the Risen Lord. Not on any one of the other high festival days of the Church year where worshipers come in their finery and sing songs and carols and anthems and rejoice. She sought out her real treasure, in her sinfulness and weakness, in her humility and repentance, on, of all days, Ash Wednesday—and that treasure was to be found and clung to when the priest rubbed ashes on her brow.

She clung to God's promise to save her. To bring her into real life, not made-up life or glossy magazine cover life or life hob-knobbing with the movers and shakers of society, but real life where God offered a whole new way of being his beloved child. No more pretending necessary, no superficiality allowed, just being real with God. Forever.

And that real life doesn't wait to begin somewhere down the road, like, when we retire, or when we reach a certain age, or when we've completed a set amount of religious tasks, or when we die. It's ready to begin now, as ashes are rubbed hard on brows, and we hear God speaking to us loud and clear through Paul's words to the Corinthians:

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!

Because right now **is** the acceptable time for Jesus to do his good, transformative work in us, while we are sinful and weak, while we are humble and repentant. Right now **is** the acceptable time—not sometime later, when we think we are more ready or more deserving or better able to show others just how religious we can be. Right now **is** the time for God's reign of new life to begin in us through the reconciling, forgiving love he poured out in his Son Jesus. Cling to God's promise; hold it close to your heart; **treasure** it. **AMEN.**