

Ashes, Ashes, We All Fall Down

A Sermon Preached by
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Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
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Isaiah 58:1-12

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

When I was in the fourth grade, my best friend was Ann Marie Green. It was 1954, my father was in the Air Force and we were stationed in Japan, just about as far away from the familiar as a person could get in the mid-1950's. One of the reasons that Annie Green and I were best friends was that we were the two tallest girls in the class. Well, actually, we were the two tallest students in the fourth grade, and being tall together at nine is somehow better than being tall alone. But the similarities pretty much ended there. Annie Green had dark brown eyes and brown hair that she wore in a page-boy, parted on the side and held in place with barrettes. She wore plaid skirts or jumpers, white blouses, and neat cardigan sweaters that matched her skirts, all reminiscent of a parochial school uniform, and finished off with very cool brown and white saddle shoes with bobby socks.

I, on the other hand, had blue eyes, hidden behind black cat-eye glasses, and long blond hair, that my mother wouldn't let me cut, which I usually wore pulled back into a pony-tail. I wore dresses that my grandmother made, often hand-me-downs from my older sister, and ballet flats instead of saddle shoes. I can still see the two of us, Annie Green and me, in that fourth-grade classroom, now more than a half-century later. And the memory always surprises me with its clarity.

There was another, much more subtle difference, not one that most people would have given much thought to. But I thought about it a lot. Annie Green's family was Catholic, and they went to church with great regularity. We didn't go to church, not even at Christmas or Easter, not in those days anyway. Had my family been church-goers at all, we would have gone to the Protestant services at the base chapel. You were either Protestant or Catholic in the military, and we were neither, as far as I could tell. My sister and I hadn't even been baptized. Annie Green had already made her

first communion, and had a picture to prove it – a picture of her in a white dress and veil. I wanted to be in that picture in the worst way.

I was never more envious of Annie Green and her church-going family than the day she emerged from mass with a smudge of ashes on her forehead. It only added to the mystery of her faith, a 1950's pre-Vatican II Catholic faith, that didn't just simply exclude little Protestant girls like me, but left us on another planet. I was absolutely enamored of the mystery. I don't remember Annie Green explaining the ashes, or even saying much about it. I doubt that we even talked about it, although we talked about the nuns in her school back home and about how Annie wanted to be a nun when she grew up.

What I do remember is knowing somehow, somewhere deep in my soul, that those ashes identified her, marked her in some way that was beyond my understanding, beyond my reach at that moment, that they symbolized something I didn't have. Something I desperately wanted, but didn't know how to get. Those were the days when the Annie Greens of the world gave up something for Lent, probably chocolate or candy. Even that was not beyond my longing. If Annie Green gave up chocolate, I could give up everything sweet. If Annie Green wanted to be a nun, I wanted to be the Mother Superior.

I didn't think about the ashes on Annie Green's forehead until many years later when my own forehead was marked with ashes for the first time. The memory was even more sharply defined when I put my finger in the ashes and marked the foreheads of members of my own congregation, calling them each by name and saying, "You are dust and to dust to shall return. You are a beloved child of God." It was in that moment that I knew just how much I loved them. And in that moment, I knew just how much we are loved by God.

It's such an ancient and mysterious rite, the imposition of ashes. It's a sign of God's claim on our lives, not unlike baptism. But it's not a practice we Presbyterians have been quick to embrace. We've never been comfortable about such an open display of our faith. The Gospel lesson in Matthew speaks about pious practices: about almsgiving, and prayer, and fasting, and warns the reader to beware of practicing piety in order to be seen by others. We take such lessons to heart, careful not to let others know what form our charity takes; reluctant to speak openly about our faith, claiming that it's a private matter; and finding the practice of fasting most unfashionable these days.

Or maybe we don't like being reminded of our own mortality, maybe the words seem too harsh, the whole liturgy too orthodox or Catholic for our taste, just a little too mysterious.

And yet, here we are at the beginning of Lent, understanding it as a time of repentance, of *metanoia*, of turning around, turning back to God; each of us, perhaps longing for some sign, wanting that visible mark of membership, that reaffirmation of our baptism. "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom." If not ashes on our foreheads, then some sign that we belong to God.

The ashes of Lent do indeed remind us of our human frailty, of our mortality. But they also remind us that God takes us just as we are, frail and human and prone to sin, but also recoverable, forgivable, forgiven. Lent is a time to sweep the debris from our lives, to wash down the walls of our souls. It is not tidy. One of my favorite Lenten resources reminds us that "Our windows need washing, our temples need cleansing, and the earth itself needs a good bath. . . . Winter doesn't leave without blustery battles that push things over and mess things up and even break things. Lent, if we honestly face its fury, will leave the landscape littered with bits and pieces of ourselves."¹

Lent sneaked up on us early this year, and even though we know that the snow will melt and the street sweepers will replace the snow plows, it's hard to get beyond the cold and blustery battles that we're still in the middle of. And so I pulled the book off the shelf to remind myself of the words that followed what I just read: "Sometimes the only antidote is to take more of the poison. And so on our foreheads we rub dirt: Eden gone to ashes, the dustbin emptied of a winter's worth of soot, last year's leaves riddled with worms, the broken earth turned by the plow, the dry earth thirsty for water to make it clay of a new creation. And when Lent is done and the Passover arrives we'll have water in abundance, water to bathe our feet and water to drown the demons and water to wash away the winter. And as Bishop Ambrose reminds us, even if we forget to fill the font, there'll be water in abundance in our tears."²

Maybe it is not so much what we will give up for Lent, but rather what we will take on for Lent, acknowledging the extravagance of God who claims us at baptism and who longs for the same extravagance in our faithfulness. Living out that claim requires more than ashes on our foreheads. It may require dirt on our hands, an ache in our bones, or pain in

¹ Peter Mazar, A Lent Sourcebook, p. vi

² Ibid.

our hearts when we take up the work of almsgiving, prayer and fasting; when we take up the works of love.

“Is this not the fast that 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 them naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?”

Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest and well-known preacher and writer, says that, “The big disillusionment for the chosen people was that God was not where they thought. They thought God was supposed to be with them when they prayed and fasted and studied their scriptures. They thought nothing pleased God more than to find them on their knees, dressed in sackcloth and covered with ashes – but they were wrong. . . . The big disillusionment for the chosen people was that they could not serve God without serving their neighbors. Their relationship to God was not separable from their relationship to other people, especially the least of them. They had hoped they could keep their faith a private matter between them and their God, but it turned out to be an illusion.”³

Whether yours is a fast of discipline or a fast of solidarity, there is no end to the works of love that are available if we are willing. It is never just between God and us. We do not travel this Lenten journey alone.

And so we come to the table, where we receive the gifts of bread and wine, where we receive the gift of community, a place where we belong and in that belonging know that we also belong to God. We come to the table where we can acknowledge our failings, soak up forgiveness, recover our strength, and face into the wind. We come to the table to be filled enough to withstand the fast of God’s own choosing. And we come to the table to remember our baptism and be faithful. Amen.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, Gospel Medicine, p. 68-69