

“Christ, the power of God”

March 15, 2009

Text: Exodus 20:1-17, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

I.

A little over two weeks back, at the Ash Wednesday service I was leading, at the conclusion of the service, everyone came forward—one by one—to receive the marking of ashes on their forehead. And as I applied the ashes, to each of them I said, very simply:

Remember, from ashes you have come and to ashes you shall return.

No matter how we break it down, those words are very humbling. Immediately, they put our lives into perspective, suggesting to us the fleeting nature of life—how we don’t live on this earth forever.

From ashes you have come and to ashes you shall return is a sobering wake-up call for us to take a look at our lives ... to sort ourselves out. As we move towards Holy Week, this is what our journey of Lent is about.

The ashes compel us to look inward and they invite us to reconcile and work out whatever darkness looms in our spirit.

To some extent, our lives are always a balancing of the tug of the world with the movement of the Spirit. But during Lent, all this balancing has a direction ... because our Lenten journey heads, unavoidably, towards the cross.

II.

Just as the ashes of Ash Wednesday remind us of our mortality, the cross reminds us of our human weakness—our sin; because it was the sin of the world that put Jesus to death on the cross. The cross was never God’s idea. It was never God’s plan or an expression of God’s will.

The cross was the horrific consequence of a sinful world. CHECK IT OUT! It was Roman Law and Jewish Torah, the two most advanced legal systems of the day, that conspired to put Jesus to death on the cross.

Because of this, the cross is always a sobering reminder to all of us of our need to deal with whatever darkness or whatever imperfection exists in our spirit

What Lent says—to me and to all of us—is *Hey, you’ve got some work to do along the way, some sorting out to do, things you need to work on.*

Between the ashes that mark Lent's first day and the joyful trumpets of Easter morning, each of us—metaphorically or literally—needs to come to the altar of confession ... with whatever is in our hearts:

- our sadness and sorrow, our disappointment ...
- our anxiety and fear ... our anger, resentment, jealousy, envy ... whatever it is ...
- our excessive worrying ... our compulsive need to control ... whatever is burdening our spirit ...

Lent helps us to see the cross on the horizon while, at the same time, NOT dimming the hope of the Easter joy that lies beyond.

III.

The promise of Easter is that we are raised to new life. But we can only be raised to new life after we have first died to our old life. Symbolically, Lent is the season for sorting out the things we need to die to in preparing ourselves for the new life that Easter brings.

A *dying to* is a sort of repentance ... a turning away from—from stuff we want to rise above ...

- Like an instant impulse to judge ... or make rushed conclusions about others.
- Or being too quick to fall back on *woe is me* and the constant whining and complaining.
- Or in the shrinking away from responsibility and being too quick to blame our life's shortcomings on others.

All of us have things we need to die to or *turn away from* in order to be the person God created us to be. Still, as we all know, it's not always easy to fess up and admit when we mess things up—with careless decision making, poor listening, or just plain laziness ... or whatever it is.

A healthy repentance isn't simply some dark, guilt-ridden path of self-flagellation either. It's a process of renewal and liberation. There's an unburdening in our repentance that frees us. All of this—symbolically—is the work of Lent.

What Easter celebrates is the triumph of suffering love over the impulses of death. In other words—GET THIS—Easter has a context. It doesn't just show up every year after Spring break or whenever.

However, the cross is critical in this process because the cross prompts our confession. If we have nothing to confess, no crookedness to make straight; if we're perfect and flawless in every way, then what need have we for the new life of Easter?

IV.

Jesus died on the cross. But he didn't *just* die there; he suffered, unimaginably. It was his suffering on the cross—holding fast to faith, holding fast to love, with words of forgiveness (even) on his lips—that captures our imagination about him and that makes him such a compelling savior; that makes him truly, **Christ, the power of God.**

We can't help but comment, *He loved God that much! He had that much faith in God! His entire being, in mind, heart and spirit, was that tied in to God!* Who among us would not want some of that power?

That's why the *suffering love of Jesus* holds so much power for us as Christians. Remember, however we understand the resurrection, it was *that* Jesus that God raised from death. The Jesus who didn't waver on the cross ... who was utterly faithful unto death.

That's a lot to consider for us who seek to be his followers.

V.

Ultimately, the *suffering love of Jesus*, is about life. **Christ, the power of God** exalts life. This was Paul's convincing argument in **1 Corinthians 1**.

CHECK IT OUT! God takes precisely what the world rejects—namely, the suffering love of Jesus on the cross (keep in mind that the cross was the most repugnant symbol in Jesus' time)—and claims that life (the one who died on the cross) as God's own life. That's why an experience of the cross is so critical to the way we understand resurrection.

In any event, all of this was mind-blowing to both the Jews and the Greeks. God takes the alleged wisdom and power of the world and turns them upside down.

When Paul is writing to the Corinthians, some of whom were so full of themselves, so puffed up in pride at their own learning and their own status, Paul says to them:

*For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is **the power of God.***

And going on, *Where is the one who is wise? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?*

*For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but WE proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, **Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.***

VI.

Strangely enough, the Ten Commandments that Ruby read to us earlier are also about life. If we pay attention, throughout the Bible, LIFE is what God is about. From the dawning of creation, God continues to *give* life and to *call us to* life, again and again.

The **Torah** calls Israel to life. The **prophets** call both Israel and the nations *back to life*. We're called *back* to life when we lose our way, when we sin, when we violate the terms of our sacred covenants.

In the Ten Commandments, which are part of the Torah (the first five books of the Bible), God's primary purpose is to preserve life. The first three Commandments are about the holiness of God, the Giver of LIFE. They're the foundation for everything.

1. No other gods before you
2. No false or graven images
3. And don't take the Lord's name in vain. Names are important ... they say who we are. God's name is sacred.

The seven *Thou shall nots* that follow serve to preserve life. Think about it from a BIG PICTURE perspective.

4. Sabbath rest ... which reminds us that we all need time for recovery. Even God rested in the seventh day. We all know of the deleterious impact stress has on our lives; this stress exists in the first place because we don't pay enough attention to our need for rest.
5. Honoring our parents, the ones whose seed gives us life. This is critical for a social ordering of community life.
6. Don't kill ...
7. Don't commit adultery ...
8. Don't steal ...
9. Don't bear false witness against your neighbor (don't lie) ...
10. Don't covet ...

These prohibitions are all guidelines for our individual and communal well being.

Old Testament scholar and fellow *United Church of Christ* member, **Walter Brueggemann** enlightened me years ago about what's at stake in these hallowed commandments when he noted:

Commandment violation introduces a distorting element into reality.

When I thought that through, it made sense. When we violate any of the *Thou shall nots*, soon, everywhere about us, there's distortion.

Distortion in primary relationships ... distortion in the trust among neighbors and members of the community. Eventually all of this becomes compounded until chaos reins in the heart of community life and potentially destructive impulses and forces are unleashed.

VII.

Christ, the power of God hallows life. It hallows life because **Christ, the power of God** is love as pure as it gets.

This foolish love ... that loves even when it doesn't make sense ... when it contradicts all logic ... all rational constructs ...

This vulnerable love ... that loves even when it hurts our pride and subordinates our ego.

Christ, the power of God is the source of that love in the world that is so powerful, so utterly engaging and mesmerizing and consuming that we don't care about winning or losing ... or about logic and being rational ...

In closing, a story that helps us catch a glimpse of this love.

I'm sitting in the steam room at Shula's Athletic Club having a casual conversation with this young man when, suddenly, he takes the conversation to another level and asks me a question about his romantic life ... caught me a little off guard.

- He's 28 and has been going with this young lady for three years ... they've had a falling out, but he still has feelings for her. Also, he felt he'd been the one who had messed things up.
- However, some things had happened to the point where—now—he's feeling jilted by her. Most of his friends have been telling him that she was *playing him* ... using him. What should he do?

We sat and talked for awhile and finally, I just said to him: *Do what's in your heart* ... when you share what's in your heart, love is served and that's all that matters. If you love her, tell her you love her. Love is a beautiful thing. There's no winning or losing. Love is bigger than that.

For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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