

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

Ash Wednesday/February 10, 2016

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The meaning of Ash Wednesday today is a “power fast.” It sounds like a sports drink. You could market that name, “power fast.” But what it means for us is to fast from power over people. It is a fast from serving one’s own interest, from oppressing one’s workers. We fast from holding power over people. It is a fast from quarrelling and fighting to try to get the upper hand.

Jesus says whenever we fast we are not to look dismal and disfigure our faces. If to do so is just to make yourself look better than others, holier, more pious, then you might as well wash your face so nobody knows. The point of the ash on our forehead is to make ourselves look more like others, to share in a common humanity, no better than others, humble. Our power is not over but with.

Sometimes we use money to leverage power over someone. We give money or withhold money to get the better of another. The meaning of Ash Wednesday is to fast from using money in a coercive or manipulative way. Now we are in a season of politics, but perhaps this message still has value. Today we begin a power fast, fasting from seeking power over others.

Instead, Jesus taught that our heart follows our money. “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” To be true to our hearts we need to use our money for power *with* others not over them.

What this means for Isaiah is that we work to loose the bonds of injustice. Power with others means to share our bread with the hungry, clothe the naked, and satisfy the needs of the afflicted. Then Isaiah said, the Lord will make you strong, “and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.”

If we give up power over others, what are we left with? Paul says all we have left then with which to commend ourselves is “purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God.” I’ll take that. Our power fast brings us into the power of God that is love. It is paradoxical.

Paul describes the paradox of our power fast. “We are treated as imposters (you haven’t really given up power), and yet are true (we really have); as unknown (if you give up your power you are nobody), and yet we are well known; as dying, and see – we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.”

So today we begin a power fast. It is not a sports drink but a way of life. It is a fast from serving our own interest by holding power over others. The ash is a kind of trademark that shows we are human, no better than anyone else. Power *with* means sharing our resources with others, to help those in need. Then we are strong. When we fast from power over, then we find the power of God that is genuine love. The paradox is that when it seems we are left with nothing, in fact with God and one another we possess the world.

Amen.