

# Sermons at Saint Paul's

*A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name*

Ash Wednesday

The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

We mourn our sins today, and we pour ashes on ourselves. These ashes are meant to remind us of the dust of which we were made, and to which we shall return. The call is for us to remember. What is there to remember, one may ask? I want to share two stories about my experiences this morning at the Chestnut Hill East Train Station. The first story is about a gentleman who chanced upon me standing by the St. Paul's Ash Wednesday banner. He lit up the moment he saw me, he was like "Is today Ash Wednesday? I am Catholic but I hope it is alright to have some ashes from you." I said sure. He drew forward and had me administer ashes on his forehead. Although this gentleman was shocked to have learned that today was Ash Wednesday, it wasn't lost on him where his treasure was. He may not be particularly religious, but he was aware of what Ash Wednesday meant to him.

The second story is about another man who came up to me, and told me he was running late so he could not get the Ashes. I gave him a flier with a prayer on it. A few moments later, he came out of the train and asked if he could get the Ashes because the train delayed. I duly administered the ashes on his forehead. To this man, there was something about the ashes, if for nothing at all, it reminded him of his own humanity and where his treasure was or ought to be. Where is our treasure? Where do we store that which is more important than anything else?

In Jesus' time, folks could easily tell who the righteous people were. The sheer overt religious practices and the way they carried themselves created an impression of holiness and piety. One of the problems Jesus had was that he could not stop calling these people out on their façade. He simply could not help himself by calling the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. We too, are often tempted to be pious and self-righteous, not because we are, but because we want to come across as being better than others, holier and much nearer to God than others, and dare I say more spiritual than others. It is an attempt to set ourselves apart from others-it is about positioning. The point of Jesus' recommendation was to be religious, but private; be religious, but measured, because the one to whom your religiosity and generosity may mean something sees in secret, and He who sees in secret will reward your generosity and faithfulness.

We are reading the book of Job in our Wednesday morning Bible Study. Job is under enormous pressure to curse God because he had lost all his treasure-the earthly treasure which moth destroys and thieves steal. One of his friends-Eliphaz seeks a correlation between the pious and righteous Job's suffering and Job's acts of omission or commission. But there is no correlation. Because it is simply impossible for mortals of clay and dust to be wholly righteous and pure like their maker. This is the lesson Job needed to learn. And this is the lesson we also need to learn, more especially to be reminded of our mortality, our sins and our need for repentance.

For me, Lent begins with a call to repentance. And repentance is my only pathway out of my illusion into the place of newness, healing, reconciliation, rebirth and a change of heart. And to repent, will require some depth of honesty with ourselves. To convince ourselves of leading a virtuous life is to be dishonest with ourselves. "Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers." The prophet Isaiah said. We therefore must begin, with a kind of assessment that helps us question ourselves and our motives.

To repent requires that we honor our passion for connection with others by celebrating the commonality of all humans. To be honest is to accept the dust and clay which all humans share, and that awareness alone should limit our desire to disassociate ourselves from others based on any of our human categories. And so to be honest, like the prophet Isaiah said, it is to loosen the bonds of injustice, undo the yoke that human categories inflict upon all and setting the oppressed free. To repent would mean developing a common language that will open the way for talking with each other. To be able to talk to ourselves and to each other will require not a new kind of English or German, Spanish, Swahili, Fante or French, but a kind of language that is wrapped in honesty and desires to satisfy the needs of those who are afflicted by our actions.

Lent has never meant as much as it means now. We are witnessing rising anti-Semitism and a feeling of betrayal from the institutions that are meant to protect our shared values. Our society is now a victim society. Each demographic group is a victim of some sort. African Americans are victims, women are victims, immigrants are victims, children are victims, gays and lesbians are victims, middle Americans are victims and even those who were never described as being victims, are now victims for not ever being victims before. The solutions we have developed for some of our problems are now problems themselves.

So, where do we go from here? Two men came seeking ashes that remind us of our common humanity. Two men came seeking ashes symbolizing our need for repentance. We cannot change the whole world by ourselves alone, but if we pursue the path of the gospel, in spite of any hardship that we may encounter, we can share its redeeming light with all who have nothing, and know they have nothing and yet possess every treasure under the sun because we are each other's treasure. Amen.