

Sermon for Ash Wednesday – March 6, 2019
Church of Reconciliation, San Antonio
The Rev. Judith L. Rhodes

Welcome to Lent: An Affair of the Heart!

Last night's pancake supper was so wonderful, a celebration of joy, laughter, and community gathered around sacred tables. It was a gift for me as I anticipated crossing the threshold which today is marked by Ash Wednesday, the "official" first day of the holy season of Lent.

As I shared on Sunday, my earliest memories of Lent were very solemn ones, of hushed voices, and imposed silence, and derogatory language about human nature that I neither understood or wanted to accept.

I was then, and I remain now, a proverbial optimist, a being filled with hope and joy. And more than that, my deepest desire is to fall deeper and deeper in love with my Creator and yours, whose words in the Genesis narrative reveal the incomprehensible nature of Divine love- a love which knows no bounds, no limits, no exclusions.

And so, I guess I did, in my own "childish ways" construct as we all do, a concept of God that seemed more like what I held in my heart, a God who would never, ever turn God's self away from me. An energy, a grace, a healing, a reconciling Being whose nature was to call me ever closer. I believed that, then as a child, and in all truth, I believe that to this day.

My friends, like you, I am no longer that naïve child. I know the shadowy places of my heart. I understand the sinful impulses and hurtful inclinations that have led me to hurt and alienate others while moving me into a less than wholehearted desire for intimacy with the Holy.

So, yes, some of the challenging theological language of Lent does stop me in my tracks and takes my breath away. Yes, I am a sinner. And oh yes, I am also made in the image and likeness of my Creator- seemingly incompatible for the human but not irredeemable for God. And that is the truth I hold onto today.

Last night's feast of pancakes and bacon, sausage, and fruit are not meant for us to entirely leave behind. And certainly, the call to gather as spiritual brothers and sisters in Christ does not cease as Lent begins.

So what is this invitation to a holy Lent really mean for each of us across the diversity of lifespans? I pray that the introductory words of the Book of Common Prayer set the true and reliable tone for our Lent.

"Almighty and all-loving God, you hate nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent. Create and make in us new and contrite hearts... "

Lent, my friends is a season to immerse oneself into an ***affair of the heart***. It is a season to examine, name, and let go of any conflicting desires of our hearts when it comes to our primary relationship with the Divine.

What haunts you in the shadows of your lives? What are the “things done and left undone” with which you still wrestle? What time, real, precious time do you offer your whole self to just being present before the One who called you by name even before you drew your first breath? Do you hear the Holy One’s invitation to come closer than ever before, surrendering the fear, the guilt so long burdening your heart? Will you take these forty days of Lent and not get distracted by your resolution to give something up, only to take on more guilt if you falter?

What is it, really, truly, deeply, that God desires to offer you beginning right now that will forever set you free?

You see, I think Lent is a season of invitation to discover anew, the liberating license to Love more... ***Love God, MORE... Love your neighbor, MORE... Love yourself... MORE!***

Jesus did not speak the words of the greatest Commandment as some great suggestion that we may or may not take seriously. My friends in Christ, this is the Way of Love that we are each called to seek after in Lent and live into more joyously and freely for the rest of our lives.

Sure, we may want to give us something that indeed is an overindulgence in our lives. We may want to celebrate the sacrament of Reconciliation of a Penitent with a priest companion during this season as the act of naming out loud before God and God’s church, a public declaration not so much of guilt and never one of shame, but a declaration of the freedom that is ours in Jesus Christ.

We see dust, dirt, humus, so often in terms of death and final endings. The blessing today of Ash Wednesday is that there is so much more to dust than death if we are a true disciple and follower of Jesus Christ. Yes, there is a blessing in this dust, made in sign of the cross of Jesus Christ. I offer you the prayer, titled, “Blessing of the Dust” written by Jan Richardson as a companion song for your Lenten journey. (Read the Blessing)

My friends in Christ, today you and I are invited into the Blessing of the Dust... where a new and contrite heart beats with the passionate desire of deeper intimacy with God in Jesus Christ as no time before; where you find the peace that passes all understanding in the truth that defies human understanding: Death is not an ending. Death is the gateway to eternal life in the presence of Divine Love. And although each of us will experience physical death, we hold fast to the promise of eternal life where in the end, it is eternally, a new beginning...

May your Lent be a holy one, indeed!

Amen.