

Ash Wednesday, 2010 – Joel 2 and Matthew 6: R. Prior

Prayer

We are suffering from an epidemic! It is all around us and we often participate in it. If we are not careful it can define us, our values and approach to life. It is not a new epidemic; it has been around for years, centuries even. It waxes and wanes from time to time. Sometimes it is hard to see and at other times much like the present it is everywhere. It is embedded in the makeup of cultures and sadly is the defining characteristic of personalities, in some to a pathological extent and in others just as something they have allowed themselves to be inducted into.

What is this epidemic? Well, it is narcissism. That's right, good old fashioned narcissism. It pervades our culture and our outlooks and powerfully affects our lives. It is simply the notion that I, I, am the center of attention if not the center of the universe. My needs and desires, my convenience, comfort, and aspirations are more important than yours. My children's needs and futures are more important than just about anything else, and my overarching sense of entitlement and right to happiness and well being are paramount values for my existence.

The expectation is that the institutions to which I relate will agree to serve these needs and desires that I have and will understand my assumption that I need do nothing in return. It is after all "all about me and all about those I love,

period.” I am the center of attention, in my own mind the star in the human drama, and exempt at all costs from accountability and most of all a need to take into account the needs of others or to sacrifice for them.

We see these patterns in the way people treat each other in the common ways of life. We see this in the way people regard or rather dis-regard their marriage vows and go with whatever feels good or meets their needs regardless of the devastation it might mean to others. We see it in the unbridled greed of corporation executives and politicians who think their perceived entitlement chronically trumps the public trust. We see it when we get bent out of shape about trivial things and make an issue of small slights because we think we are taken advantage of.

We live in a very narcissistic culture and we come by this version of human brokenness honestly and sadly it is in some regrettable measure our legacy to our age and our children. I wish I were being overly cynical but I fear I am not.

Today we begin Lent which may be the most blessed and healing time of the year for us. It is a time when we are pressed to radical honesty to cut through all our rationalizations and avoidance and look hard at the ways we collude with and relish our self centered and self indulgent ways. In response to our illusions about ourselves and our lives the age old concise message of Lent is: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

From as early as the fourth century Christians have dusted themselves with ashes as a sign that all was not right in their lives and that somehow they were missing the mark of being human and needed to engage in the traditional Old Testament rite of penance and self examination. The Gregorian Sacramentaries of the eighth century forward reflect a service for the Dies Cinerum... the day of Ashes. This ritual was a reminder of mortality and acknowledgment of the realization that life was in God's hands not our own. Life is a gift to be treasured and shared as a blessing to others and not something to be hoarded and devoted to self indulgence.

The lessons for tonight from Joel and Matthew are set in the context of worship, but their message about worship is reflective or much broader issues of life. "Rend your hearts and not your garments, Joel says. No empty acts of piety and faint praise for God but setting things right is going to take some serious soul searching and revision. This was the work not of the individual but of the whole community that had lost its way and was facing judgment and hungry for grace and forgiveness. And the promise is that that forgiveness and healing was there for them if they sought it.

Jesus in the gospel passage from the Sermon on the Mount is also addressing the pietistic practices of almsgiving, fasting and prayer and the way people had made even these pious practices into exhibitionistic acts of self gratification. Jesus criticized people for behaving in ways that honor themselves

more than exercising faithfulness to God. Narcissism indeed. Even our acts of praise and prayer can become self centered displays of how wonderful and important I am with what I believe being a minor sub text in the process.

And so Jesus tells us to anoint our heads and wash our face and not display the fact that we have entered into an awareness of our own mortality and brokenness because the intoxicant of the praise that may gain us is both damaging and addictive. It corrupts the fragile righteousness of our nature and while initially lifting us up ends up enslaving our spirits.

Paul in tonight's epistle speaks of reconciliation in the body of believers; reconciliation to God and to each other by putting aside our own needs desires and ambitions and focusing our lives on others. It is a difficult message for our age and for every age. But it is a passage that comes in second to what I think is probably the most counter cultural and compelling passage for our age and one that we need to come to terms with in Lent and most of all in our lives. That is, not just in church, not just in worship but in what we see when we look at our values and our behavior and our outlooks. Can we dare that radical honesty?

The passage is from Philippians 2:1-8-

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better

than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited. But emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, And being found in human form, he humbles himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross.

God grant in Lent we may find that same humility and grace and the way the leads to eternal life.

AMEN.