

Ash Wednesday
Wednesday, March 9, 2011

Joel 2:1–2, 12–17
Psalm 51:1–17
Psalm 103:8–14 (Alternate)
2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10
Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

I.N.I

In the rural environs of Vermont, it's not unusual to see billowing smoke from a distance, and not to worry about the lack of fire engines on the scene. So I didn't panic when I went to make a pastoral visit with Ed Johnson.

Old Eddie Johnson lived in the Marble Company house provided for his parents, the house he was born in and the house he intended to die in, set on a hill, in West Rutland. Besides repairing any and every machine used to mine marble, Ed's job used to be the church custodian. In the old church in West Rutland, now a Masonic lodge, the Johnson family took responsibility for stoking up the furnace early on Sundays so the congregation would have heat. Now in his 80's, and forgetful, Ed was pretty much confined to the big old house and the property with outbuildings where the horses and chickens were housed, and where the buggy would be stored. Ed and I would converse about the old days, I would inquire about his health and that of his sisters Esther and Ellen, and I would marvel at his confirmation class photo and confirmation certificate ornately written in Swedish prominently displayed on his wall.

Across the road down the end of Johnson's long driveway, Ed's son Dickie would stack all sorts of brush collected over months and set it up next to the more modern but still old garage. And come early Spring, Dickie would set fire to the debris and scrap wood now a mound in size equal to the roof of the garage. So a bit of trash, scrapwood, brush, stuff you didn't need any more, anything that could take to flame, Vermonters like the Johnsons would set fire to, on the burn pile. And for hours on end the flames would crackle and dance, and smoke would rise to the sky, making ashes of accumulated debris.

Today is our day to add to the burn pile. Resentment, waste, prejudices, greed, varieties of accumulations that no longer serve their purpose, are all jettisoned before merciful God. What is it you would like to toss on?

Now's a good time as any clear out the impediments to living right. And it's amazing how freeing it can be when you release what you are clutching to, how searching your heart and taking action helps you to realign your relationships.

Jesus was persistent in front-loading right living in the gospel of Matthew. "Strive first for the kingdom of God and its righteousness" we hear in chapter 7. And today we hear "beware of practicing your piety" or better translated "beware of practicing your **righteousness** before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven."

Lutherans, never known for their showiness, generally nod and snicker at words like *hypocrite* and *secret*, because they would never think to parade their piety or their righteousness around. But notice Jesus doesn't say don't give, don't pray, don't fast, but rather don't engage in spiritual practices because others will watch, but give, pray, and fast, because they connect us to God.

So I invite you to be open to God active and engaged with the world and our lives. I invite you to give up something for Lent, something that you know you don't need, and even if it's just for a time, and toss it! More importantly, I invite you to take on something new for Lent that you need, that's good and godly, something that will allow you to become more acutely aware of your own breathing, or of someone else's breathing. Ask yourself, what could I do to become more connected to God? And commit yourself to time, meaningful time. Speak with others about this. Write it down. Start practicing.

On Wednesdays we will offer time and space here at Bethesda to pray and keep company. We will offer resources that are both time-honored and contemporary that weave words and actions related to prayer. We will offer shared mealtimes after noonday prayer and before evening prayer in order to enable us to connect with each other and to offer thanks for nourishment and time.

Some of us are using Gail Ramshaw's devotional book *40 Days and Forty Nights*, holding up images from Scripture for each day. Today is of course, **ashes**.

This is from today's entry:

This is the day when Christians mark themselves with the ashes of these two inescapable truths: we sin daily, and we will die.

The ash day of Lent is some ninety days before the fire day of Pentecost. Our ashes will be washed off in the font and replaced with tongues of fire. This is an odd reversal, since we know that fire produces ashes, not ashes fire. Yet the Christian faith proclaims a truth quite different from the facts of nature. Although we and all we love will end in ash, we place our confidence not in nature but in divine grace. From death will come life; from ashes will arise the Spirit of God. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress © 2006), p 7

I am giving out Lenten arks with devotions for families with children. For those that will use them, plan to spend time each day opening a new window, reading the related Bible story, and using the devotional book included. Behind each door is an animal or two. Today there are locusts, or flying grasshoppers. Here's something from today's devotional entry:
Spring used to be called "lengthen time" because days grow longer in spring. "Lengthen time" got shortened to "Lent." It might still be winter outside your window, but spring will soon be springing. In many homes spring means spring cleaning. Aboard the ark, we know what cleaning inside and outside is all about.

I am also giving out Prayer Tents from Bread for the World, an advocacy organization focusing on hunger-related issues. You can set up the prayers at your kitchen or dining room table, using the prayer for each week and talking about the suggested action. (see bread.org)

I would love for us to share with each another some of our spiritual practices, not because we're showy, but because by giving our testimony it helps connect us to God.

In the past year, I have learned something new about stewardship from Mark Alan Powell that I shared recently with Chris Wigren. It was Powell's reflection on Jesus' final words in today's Gospel: "for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Usually we think that it means we should give from our heart. But Powell, a New Testament scholar, points out that Jesus is actually saying the opposite. Jesus doesn't say, "where your heart is, there your treasure will be also" We give, and our hearts will follow. In my thinking, then, as we try out a spiritual practice for Lent, and it may deepen our sense of God.

Today we add to the pile what we do not need, and release what we cling to. In this Lent, as a kind of rehearsal for life, we use the time that we are given, and try out spiritual practices to connect our hearts to our actions. On this day, we receive an ashen cross to remind us that we are human, and not God. Together we open our hands and our mouths to take in mercy and reconciliation in communion bread and wine, and our hearts are warmed by the promise of God's eternal springtime.

I see that the ashes will lead to new growth. I see that the mark of the cross on foreheads gives us new resolve for right living. And I know that on the cross Jesus takes whatever we want to toss and jettison, and the cross becomes the tree of life, with healing for the nations.

Blessed Ash Wednesday.

I.N.I.