

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

The Name of the Sunday

February 9, 2005

Texts: Isaiah 58:1-12

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You really know when you've left Epiphany, the season of starlight, don't you? Ash Wednesday ushers in Lent with dramatic solemnity, draping our altar and our vestments in black. Not only do we lose our bright colors but we also get branded with ash on our faces. I remember as a child seeing my mother for the first time with the black mark of a cross on her forehead. It altered her somehow. She looked different, almost scary to me.

From the vantage point of time, I realize that part of my uneasiness was that I had glimpsed my mother's mortality. I dimly realized in my childish mind that she didn't fully belong to me; that she was marked for return to the earth and return to God one day. I never wanted that mark for myself and took every opportunity to avoid receiving it in my youth. Now in my late fifties, I am more intimately acquainted with the meaning of that mark and the truth of it for all of us. Two years ago I buried my mother's ashes. We are mortal. From dust we were created and to dust we shall return.

This month public television has been commemorating the victims of the Nazi Holocaust with several documentaries. Mostly, I have been true to my younger self and have avoided watching them, not wanting to have my sleep disturbed by reminders of the Holocaust. But one night, while channel surfing, I was caught by an interview with a Jewish survivor of Auschwitz, and couldn't opt out of her story just for a good night's sleep. She spoke of the last weeks of the Allied offensive when the Nazis knew they were losing the war and wanted to obliterate all records of their genocide. Their solution was simply to speed up the eradication of Jews, Gypsies, Gays and others deemed misfits in society in the twisted belief that if there were none of these populations left, life would simply continue as if they had never existed. And no one would, presumably, would even notice their absence. In the last weeks of their encampment, this Jewish survivor said that the extermination rate topped out at *ten thousand people a day*. Ten thousand people a day were sent to the gas chambers and the crematoriums. How was it even possible, I wondered, to snuff out the lives and get rid of the bodies of that many people each day? I listened as she spoke of the unbearable smell in the air, of the acrid smoke and the dense ash. Day after day, ashes settled on the faces of those still alive in the camp, turning their faces gray with what remained of those taken. She wept as she recalled these memories.

Hearing her made me flash forward to the horror of 9/11, our own taste of holocaust on a much smaller scale. My sister, who lives in lower Manhattan spoke of the ash that hung in the air for weeks following that awful event. It gave her a lingering cough for months. She said she knew that the dead were now physically inside her, part of her own body. She literally *breathed* them. It didn't surprise me that in synagogues all over the city, Jews sat Shiva in four-hour shifts, chanting the Psalter and speaking the names of those who had turned to ashes in less than two hours.

How is it that we have come to live in a world where human life has become so cheap to take and so expensive to support? Who is sitting Shiva and singing the Psalter for the tens of thousands of dead citizens of Iraq-- or the hundreds of thousands of victims of genocide in Darfur? Day after day, the survivors of the fishing villages in Southeast Asia bury the bodies of

their neighbors who fell victim to the recent Tsunami. What sustains them in this sad and grisly task?

Sackcloth and ashes were signs of grief in the ancient Mediterranean world. They bespoke desolation; the desolation of oppression, of loss, of shock and disappointment; the desolation of sin, of suffering and failure. Sometimes the only appropriate response to life is to wear the mark of ash and to weep for all those whose lives have been far too brief on this earth and for our own failures to make the world a safer place. Ash is a profound mark of our common humanity, our common origins and our common destiny. Many of us have scooped earth over the ashes of loved ones out on the Garden Terrace. Some of us will be committed to the soil of this very garden and our names will be engraved in stone for future generations to lay flowers on or wonder about our forgotten stories.

As melancholy as it may seem, there is a strange kind of freedom in coming to terms with our common mortality that we don't have when we are younger. Remember Mark Twain's wry comment that "Youth is wasted on the young?" While youth live fully in the present, they live the present heedless of their mortality and the preciousness of life. Coming to grips with mortality, which you can only do with the wisdom acquired by the passage of time, gives us the freedom to be fully present to every moment, knowing that all moments will pass away and *this* is our time to live and die in them. This awareness of our mortality can shrink our problems and enlarge our opportunities.

I remember a bit of dialogue from a novel whose title escapes me now. One of the characters, a plainspoken simple man, was listening to his anxious daughter fixating on a problem in her life. After a moment of silence he finally responds, "I don't see why you're *worrying* on it so. Think about it: another hundred years and it's a whole new world!" Opportunity comes when we remember we are mortal. We start to get a little perspective and see situations in their proper proportions. Things we thought were cosmic crises in our lives settle into problems we can adjust to and deal with, especially if we can also trust that we walk in the daily presence of God. As people of faith, we are to live under the rainbow of grace so as to be fully present to our daily opportunities to give and receive blessings. Only then can we ever hope to stand up to the kind of evil that is inherent in violence and disaster. The only hope we have in the face of such evil is that, under God's grace, it can be met with the fire of love-- fire that turns evil itself to ash.

We have a reminder of this in the imposition of ashes today. The ash that will mark our faces comes from the palm branches we waved a year ago on Palm Sunday. Each Palm Sunday we re-enact Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem. We wave our palms and hear again the shouts of "Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of our God!" We know from hearing the Gospel that this joyous entrance into Jerusalem would ultimate end in Jesus' death on a cross for our sakes. Perhaps the journey of love is always a journey unto death, because it requires us to spend ourselves for others. We are not meant to lie down and die, untouched by life. We are meant to die wrinkled and well-worn by a lifetime of loving.

One of the uses of ashes in the ancient world was to pour them into the ground to nurture the soil and make it good for growing. If we can receive the mark of ashes on our foreheads and see our lives as that which nurtures the soil of this earth and our fellow creatures, we have an opportunity to support new life even while being in our own process of dying. Those of you who have given a portion of your estate to the St. Francis Foundation or other worthy causes know this in a concrete way. We need to ask ourselves, who can benefit from the good soil

created by our lives? How can we as a community of mortals generate the kind of good soil that will provide ongoing benefits to those we leave behind? This seems to be the question raised by the prophet Isaiah in our reading for today.

In the spirit of Lent, Isaiah examines a community's fasting practices and finds them wanting. They are not using fasting to sharpen their awareness of the needs of others. They offer animal sacrifices as food for God without feeding the hungry in their midst. Their fasting and their sacrifices are not drawing them nearer to the poor but separating them further from the poor. Isaiah becomes God's own voice speaking to the people: Through the prophet, God says:

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house?...Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of God shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and God will answer; you shall cry for help, and God will say, "Here I am." If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil... then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.

God will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Is there any better description of what a community identity and a community calling should be? We are the bearers of the mark of God's creation. We carry the ashes of mortality and the mark of God's intentions for creation: that it be good soil from which all life springs forth. Our calling as a Christian community is the same as Israel's national identity: to loose the bonds of injustice, to break every yoke, to share our bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless into God's house. If we make this our collective calling we become the good soil fertilized by the ashes of our common humanity. When we lift the burdens of others by withholding judgment and sharing their load, we become like watered gardens. When we offer food to the hungry, we become like ancient ruins rebuilt; when we comfort the afflicted, we become the foundation upon which many generations can build; when we bring the homeless poor into God's house, we have the glory of God as our rear guard; when we watch with the dying, we cultivate the ability to hear God's voice answer "Here I am" in response to our own cry in the time of our death. Together in our common mortal life, we becoming good soil for all of life. Without noticing it, we shall become "repairers of the breach" and "restorers of streets to live in."

From the dust of earth we have come; to the dust of earth we shall return. But fear not. God is making of us good soil.

† Amen.

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