
Who are You Going to be Tomorrow?

A sermon by the Rev. Julia Mitchener
Ash Wednesday – Year C

In her book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard describes a conversation between an Eskimo hunter and the missionary who has been preaching in his village. “I want to ask you something,” the hunter says. “What’s that?” the missionary replies. “If I did not know about God and sin, would I go to hell?” “No,” the missionary says, “not if you did not know.” “Well, then,” asks the Eskimo hunter, “Why did you tell me?”^[1]

Like a missionary bearing unwelcome news, Ash Wednesday intrudes upon our lives with its yearly reminder of sin and death:

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Our days are like the grass, we flourish like a flower of the field; when the wind goes over it, it is gone.

The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

There has been so much brokenness lately. Brokenness all around us and brokenness within us. Stunning, shattering brokenness. Broken spirits, broken bodies, broken relationships, broken countries. Our culture has a hard time coping with this; it has little use for broken things or broken people. We don’t like being reminded of our own vulnerabilities, so we tend to push away anything or anyone who seems fragile.

Christianity, by contrast, lifts up—even celebrates—brokenness. “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” says Jesus, “for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.” “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” “Blessed are those who die in the Lord, for they rest from their labors.” Blessed are you when you are forced into early retirement. Blessed are you when the chemotherapy stops working. Blessed are you when you don’t make the team. Blessed are you when the life for which you worked so hard suddenly leaves you feeling cold, confused, and empty. Blessed are you when you have to flee your homeland with only the clothes on your back.

It sounds bizarre—offensive, really—this sort of thing. But Christianity has never claimed that there is the slightest thing wrong with being broken. On the contrary, Christianity celebrates all that is least, last, and lost—for only that which can die can be resurrected.

Reflecting on his struggle with a rare form of spinal cancer that left him paralyzed from the waist down, the late Reynolds Price once noted:

When we [human beings] undergo huge traumas, everybody is in league with us to deny that the old life is ended. Everybody is trying to patch us up and get us back to who we were, when in fact what we need to be told is, “You are dead. You are dead. Now who are you going to be tomorrow?”^[2]

This is the strange siren call of Ash Wednesday. *You are dead. You are dead. Now who are you going to be tomorrow?* All of us have within us that which has grown old, tired, and sick. The many wounds and warts and wobbly places of our lives that have been laid bare by the trials of the last several years. Resentments that do far more harm to us than to the people with whom we are angry. Fears that keep us trapped inside our own narrow perspectives. Addictions that offer us only temporary numbing of our pain. The harsh self-judgment that tells us we aren’t worthy of love and respect. Our scapegoating, when things are going badly, of those who are different from us. Our despair that it sometimes seems things are never going to get any better.

We bear the mark of all this deadness on our foreheads today, and yet we also bear the hope. That's right, we also bear the hope. The ashes we'll be receiving in a few minutes will be imposed in the exact same place where we receive the oil of chrism at our baptism. The place where we are reminded that "You are dust" is the same place where we are assured, "You are marked as Christ's own forever." And so, you see, our deadness is not the end. Our deadness is not the end! Not for us as individuals and not for us a society; not for our world and not for our planet.

Why did you tell me about God and sin? the Eskimo hunter wonders. Why does Ash Wednesday tell us? In the words of the poet Jan Richardson:

This is the day
we freely say
we are scorched.

This is the hour
we are marked
by what has made it
through the burning.

This is the moment
we ask for the blessing
that lives within
the ancient ashes,
that makes its home
inside the soil of
this sacred earth.

So let us be marked
not for sorrow.
And let us be marked
not for shame.
Let us be marked
not for false humility
or for thinking
we are less
than we are

but for claiming
what God can do
within the dust,
within the dirt,
within the stuff
of which the world
is made
and the stars that blaze
in our bones
and the galaxies that spiral
inside the smudge
we bear.^[3]

Amen.

^[1] Dillard, Annie. [Pilgrim at Tinker Creek](#). Harper's, 1974.

^[2] Price, Reynolds, [A Whole New Life](#). Simon & Schuster, 1984.

^[3] Richardson, Jan. "Blessing the Dust." www.janrichardson.com

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