

Sermons at St. Paul's

Ash Wednesday, 2009

Mark 1: 14 - 15

Do you recognize this hymn?

'Tis a gift to be simple

'Tis a gift to be free

'Tis a gift to come down

Where we ought to be

And when we find ourselves

In that place just right

We will be in the valley

Of Love and delight.

I imagine you know that one don't you? I bet you have heard it and, if you don't know the words, I bet you can hum along. It was a relatively unknown hymn until Aaron Copeland used it in his beautiful composition "Appalachian Spring." If you are an old hippy like me then you might even remember that Judy Collins made it to the top of the charts with her version of it in the 60's. If you are sitting there wondering who Judy Collins is well, you had to be there.

I understand that this hymn was also played at the inauguration of President O'bama just last month.

It was written by Joseph Brackett in the mid 1800's while he was an elder of the Shaker community at Sabbath Lake, Maine. The Shakers are best remembered and admired for their simplicity of living, and the beautifully design of their crafts. But the Shakers were more than craftspeople.

They were a profoundly religious community seeking a unity with God in their everyday lives. The real name of the church is The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing. Obviously, they needed a shorter name.

They got the name...Shakers....from the trembling that would happen sometimes during prayer meetings. To outsiders it looked like folks of the church had fallen into some kind of trance during prayer that would make their bodies shake. But, in fact, that shaking was part of the church's practice. It was a way to enter the ecstasy of the valley of God's delight. It was not so much a trance as a dance.

Remember the ending of the hymn?

When the true simplicity

Is gained

To bow and to bend

We shall not be ashamed

To turn and to turn it will

Be our delight

'Till by turning and turning we

Come 'round right.

Turning was prayer. It was the ecstatic dance of delight in God.

I think it is the same turning that inspired the old Moslem mystic Rumi, who lived in Turkey during the 13th century. He is best known today as a poet, but in fact he was a Dervish (which I literally means "one standing in the doorway") in the Mevlevi order of Sufis....the so called whirling dervishes...the mystics of the Islamic world, who turn in a carefully defined whirling dance that traces the orbits of the stars through the heavens.

Turning. Dancing with God.

I bet you have done some turning yourself. Did you ever roll down a hill when you were a kid...just for the sheer fun of it and end up in a dizzy tumble at the bottom?

One of the defining moments of my life involved turning. Christine, my oldest daughter, was just 2 and she was a few months out of chemo, a few months into her remission from cancer and she was happy to be out of the hospital, happy to be free.

It was a beautiful spring afternoon and we were standing in the barn yard, when she suddenly put her arms out and starting turning like a top. And as she turned she was naming everything that came into

view in a great litany of thanksgiving. She was singing "I love that tree. I love that house. I love that grass. I love that sky. I love that cloud." Faster and faster she went, until finally, unable to stand because of the dizziness of spinning she collapsed on the ground laughing and still singing, "I love it all!!" And I thought....."I want to live there."

God wants me to live there too. He wants you to live there ..

Jesus came preaching "Repent. The kingdom of God is near." He offered those who were willing to repent what he called a life of abundance. To use one of his metaphors, the life Jesus offered is like a sack of grain filled to the top and pushed down and still running over. The life of abundance is more like than you can imagine.

You can't make it happen. You can't work for it and earn it. You can't get good enough to deserve it. Rather, you get this life, if you get it all...as a gift. Jesus told us that it is like a buried treasure of incredible value, that you stumble across while you are digging in the garden. Its like a pearl of great worth that you find in an oyster that is served to you at a restaurant. Its free for the taking.

But there are a lot of things that get in the way of us receiving that gift of God.

Our culture for example. Of course, it is not just our culture. Its every culture. Its just human nature. But, the world out there is always trying to convince us that there is no free lunch. We constantly get the message that we are not good enough to be loved. Unless of course we buy the latest product. And it's a recession so who can afford the latest product?

And the world out there is constantly trying to convince us that convenience is more important than sustainability. That self-satisfaction is better than self-giving. That the value of our lives is equal to the value of our portfolio and our savings account. That the most important thing in life is me, me, me.

That is the real problem. We so often miss the treasure of abundant life, the pearl of the kingdom of God because we are all wrapped up in ourselves. We are caught up in the attempts to work our way into salvation by making enough money, or doing enough exercise or getting the right diet or the right political platform or praying enough. So often we buy into the world's lie...if we are to be saved we will have to save ourselves.

But Jesus comes telling us "the kingdom of God is near."

Of course, near is not here, but it is close. It is just around the corner, just over the next hill. Its like a treasure waiting to be found. A pearl that is there for the taking. All you have to do is reach out and receive the gift. But so often, we don't.

Sin can be defined as life without God. And we are all deep in sin...or maybe more accurately it is deep within us. We rebel. We believe the lies rather than the promise. We try to save ourselves rather than trust God.

“Repent,” say Jesus. “Repent. Life in the kingdom, the life of abundance is as close as your heartbeat. Repent.”

You may know that the Greek word for repentance, “metanoia,” literally means to turn. Actually that is the only Greek word I remember from my seminary studies and every Lent I break it out to impress you with the fact that I once studied this stuff. But actually it is a cool word. Metanoia. To turn around, to change direction. To have a radical change of heart.

Repent! Turn from yourself. That is what Jesus is telling us. Turn away from all the lies and the illusions, turn back to the truth and you will find the treasure long hidden in the field. You will get the pearl that is there for the taking. Repent. Turn back to God. Turn.

I was listening to the Beatles this morning. Yeah, I know, I really am an old hippy. But it’s a tradition. I always listen to the Beatles on Ash Wednesday.

St Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band. You had to be there.

But this morning one song, actually one line of one song caught my ear. It was written by George Harrison I would guess. Harrison sings.....”Try to see that you are really very small, and life goes on within you and without you.”

That is what we are up to here today. We smudge some ashes on our foreheads to remind us that we are really very small. In the face of all our pretensions and all our attempts at self importance, we come here to be reminded that life goes on within us...yes, but also life goes on without us. “From dust you were formed and to dust you shall return.” We are limited and mortal and of little consequence. We really are very small.

But the sign we make with those ashes on our foreheads is the sign of the cross...the sign of God’s love for us. In the cross we can see the great cost of God’s love for us. And in the cross we know our true value.

We may not be all that, our little lives may not amount to much of anything at all...but we are loved nonetheless. Loved by a God whose love for us was so fierce that he sent us his Son, to share our insignificance, to share our death that we might know for certain that we are valuable beyond measure. That is the gift.

Repent. Turn. Turn to God and open your hands. That is what Lent is all about. Lent is a 40 day dance of turning toward God.

In these days ahead we will try, as best we can, to stay focused on God. Scripture gives us some good ways to do that. Prayer, fasting and offering charity to the poor and the oppressed.

Today is the first day of our Lenten season of turning. And technically, Lent ends with the absolution, the announcement of the forgiveness of sins, on Holy Thursday.

But for me Lent always seems to end at the Easter Vigil. For me personally, the curtain comes down on Lent when the new fire is struck and the paschal candle is lit and we hear the first words of Easter in the darkness now illuminated by a single candle. "May the light of Christ rising in the darkness, dispel all fear and despair."

Between the ashes and the fire we are on a 40 day journey. A time of repentance. A time of turning. A time to dance with God.

Centuries ago the old mystic, Rumi, wrote:

Dance,

When you're broken open.

Dance,

If you've torn the bandage off.

Dance,

When you're perfectly free.

Dance,

When you are in shackles.

And you will be free.

Repent! The kingdom of God is at hand. So turn, turn

Amen

Pastor John Keating +