

“Repenting and Believing

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March 6, 2019

Ash Wednesday

Back in the late 80’s while working for the University of Minnesota bookstores, I entered the world of computers. I did finish my math work early in high school and was permitted to go to the computer room at the Roosevelt High School – I remember the machine was the size of the room and used computer cards but not much else stuck. A few years later, I took a computer class in college; the professor’s first words were this is Basic, it’s a language, it doesn’t mean simple; from there I thought the world of electronics would pass me by.

Desk top computers and the students at the University changed all of that. For one thing, I was able to go to seminary – not something I could have accomplished with a typewriter. And remember those early days of the World Wide Web. Information was far more limited and it took a while for the dot-edu, dot-org, and dot.com addresses to organize.

As social media came along, I had several friends who kept after me to join Facebook, and when I finally did, I found friends from my home town along with every workplace and school and particularly from seminary, I literally thought to myself, this is what heaven must be like.

But, of course, with this new paradise the viruses, Trojan Horses, phishing schemes, malware, and hackers.

This was an electronic Eden in my lifetime; the computer and the Web, when used for good grows community and serves humanity. But it is a tangled web we weave, (as Walter Scott would say,) there is a snake in this garden too. More to the point, there is a snake inside each one of us – reptilian is the word used to describe the part of the brain that is wired for survival. So, this is where we meet our Psalmist, for him, “There is a deep consciousness of personal responsibility for the havoc his own sin wreaks, making his pleas for divine mercy all the more poignant” (Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 2, 13).

In the midst of deep awareness of personal sin the Psalmist cries out, “Create in me a clean heart, O God. Put a new and right spirit within me.” Intelligent and capable people that we are, we may be surprised at the response; we are more likely to go and do something, fix something, sometimes, unfortunately, blame someone else, but here we find the solution lies with God.

I admit, I am losing patience and faith with decades and even centuries old injustices that plague our common life. I mean, why is sexism is still a thing? And, I am more than a little irritated with the Methodists right now and with any and all movements that discredit or vilify the rights and personhood of the LGBTQ community. That’s heterosexism.

What you might already know from our services, is how often I pray for those who suffer trauma – because this is affecting us all through our DNA from generations past and what we experience or see around us. Trauma from rape; from mental, physical or sexual abuse; from war; or from violence on the street. How can we be complacent as one of the Parkland students reminds us, “We are the Mass Shooting Generation.” Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer. It is the snake/reptilian brain that leads us to repeat these patterns of death over and over again.

Calvin insisted that Christians must know how depraved we are as human beings – and he was right, we must. But perhaps early emphasis and repetition of this doctrine has created among us a loss of hope so here is a reminder, our God is a God who cleans hearts. Jesus told the disciples to go into their cells alone and face their Creator. The show of praying, just like the appearance of goodwill, will not bear us up and nor will it convey the witness to the salvation that Jesus Christ brings; religious practices, if done without heart or from the heart's darkness, will end up feeding the depravity. Even so, Jesus and the Psalmist alike are saying go back to the practice of giving, praying, and fasting.

On this Ash Wednesday and at the beginning of Lent, we are invited once again to live into the words of the Psalmist – “Create in me a clean heart, O God. Put a new and right spirit within me.” It is a fervent and repetitive plea that we might, with God's help, be able to and, on a daily basis, act on behalf of our neighbors rather than be constantly driven by our own need for pleasure and the fear of our mortality.

The good news is that if there is a snake within, there is also a Garden within. There is a place/an Eden within each one of us where God comes to walk and talk in the cool of the evening. Out of the cloud at Jesus' baptism and again at the transfiguration, God says, “This is my son, the beloved, listen to him.” God does not say, go to war for Jesus, or to create a monarchy in his name, nor to do what is right in our own eyes. (I am right about sexism) The problem is handling it on my own and “sin lacks creativity.” Einstein put it this way, “We can't solve problems by using the **same** kind of **thinking** we used when we created them.” Repetition of the past does not work. Force does not work. Going our own way doesn't work. God says, listen to Jesus – Jesus says, go into your quiet space and face your own disquiet, your own impulse toward coercion and manipulation, and, for God's sake, face your own shame. Do this, and you will find grace.

Grace is not just a nice idea or good theory – it is transformation and rescue. And in finding salvation through facing our own sin, we come to know that, if redemption is for such a one as me, it has to be for everyone. Depravity for Calvin was not a judgment on the other but the great equalizer among the human family.

In the practice of this faith, we come to know there is a cycle of believing that leads to repenting and that leads to more and deeper believing. The believing is in the Good News and the Good News is for all. Lent is a season of intent to practice believing and repenting. This Psalm is in the lectionary every year for Ash Wednesday; we have the invitation to pray one line of it for the next forty days and forty nights, to pray one section of it, to pray each section of it, to memorize it, to write it out and put it in our pockets daily. And most importantly, we have the invitation to live it, as it asks us continually, do you and I believe in God's constant work of the inner conversion of the snake? Can you and I continually invite and allow God to make that happen within? Because if we do, we become the seeds for healing in the midst of trauma; seeds of a new spirit in the face of racism and sexism; we become the seeds to grow grace rather than shame so that community can abound and the great loneliness of our time abate.

Of this Ash Wednesday, Jan Richardson wrote in a poem titled Blessing the Dust (from *Circle of Grace*):

“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.”