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“Ash Wednesday Meditation”

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Ash Wednesday (Year A)

March 5, 2014

II Corinthians 5: 14 – 20

For me, this Ash Wednesday brings with it an overlay of sadness. I don't know if you may be experiencing it or not. It's a peculiar kind of sadness.

Perhaps this feeling reflects several significant losses that have been suffered in the life of this congregation and community, among our family and friends. It has been an intense two weeks. And for those families bearing such losses, that intensity will linger for a long time.

Perhaps it is because we have just come through a remarkable Winter Olympics hosted by Russia, with the goodwill and warmth that such occasions can bring, only to see it all fall apart in Ukraine. Peace is such a fragile thing.

Maybe another way to describe it is like this: it is a sadness from seeing things the way they are and wishing that life was different, of believing it should be and could be better. Not only is it a wish that things should be better, but it includes a sense that if different choices were made, if better priorities were pursued, if somehow we worked at it as though we could make a difference, then life would be better.

A few years back there was an advertisement making the rounds. In it, the interviewer asks three adults a question: “What vegetable is most often eaten by children as young as 15 months?” After giving answers like peas, carrots, and

broccoli, they hear the accurate answer: French fries. One of the responders says, “That’s sad.” It is sad. It shouldn’t be that way. We live in a nation of plenty, of healthful choices, and educated parents. Can we not do better than that?

School districts suffering from budget woes and low morale. And where do politicians and parents aim their ire? At the front lines where education takes place, with those who day-in and day-out make a difference by their contact with children: teachers and teacher aides. That makes me sad. It shouldn’t be that way.

On my way to and from my residence, I pass by a street corner twice a day. In the paper I read that a young woman’s body is found there, where she has been shot dead. Driving by, I see a cross marking the spot. Does life have to be like this?

People at odds with each other over significant and trivial issues. There is enough conflict in the world: can we not learn to work through our disagreements? It seems so simple, yet it appears beyond our reach. And that makes me sad.

And so I stumble into Ash Wednesday with this sadness. The ashes that will mark my forehead seem an all-too-obvious reminder of the nature of life and a sense of futility. From dust we came and to dust we shall return.

But that is not really what Ash Wednesday and the Season of Lent are all about. The Apostle Paul speaks to that new reality: “From now on,” Paul declares, “we regard no one from a human point of view. If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

That is the process which Lent embodies. Penitence recognizes the sad reality in which we find ourselves. Yet Lent leads Christians forward, from penitence and sadness. In the disciplines of Lent when we reflect and ponder, we are led to something known as repentance. Repentance is not a passive mindset; it is not another phase of being sorry and sad. Repentance is active. Repentance is changing direction, doing something new. Repentance is embracing a new life which has been given to us. It is not bemoaning what is and merely wringing our hands. Instead it works toward what shall be, what can be, what God intends to be for all creation.

Lent is the movement of God's people from the sadness of what may be our present experience to the proclamation of a new reality that we are an Easter people!!

We may begin Lent with ash on our foreheads. But every step of the way toward Easter we see new possibilities: we work for reconciliation, we promote health and healing, we seek peace and justice; we love, we challenge, we embrace, we give. That is the very essence of our new life in Christ.

Ashes are but a dark beginning in what will lead to life!