



# SAINT LUKE'S

## "FAST TO FEAST"

ASH WEDNESDAY

JOEL 2:1-2, 12-17

2 CORINTHIANS 5:20B-6:10

MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-21

PSALM 103

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY

MARCH 1, 2017

Today we confess what a mess we have made of this planet and God's vision of human community. We do not split hairs. The pronoun "We" is much more prominent than "I" on Ash Wednesday. We confess we are all complicit in the disorder. We participate in creating and sustaining a world where economics are vastly unequal. We waste resources – for a long while, we closed our ears to the warnings of environmentalists; collectively, we elected leaders who did the same. We realize how hard change is and how much effort and care recycling and clean energy will take.

We are all complicit and so all of us confess to every sin in the Litany of Penitence. We confess that our sins are more than errors of judgement, or mistakes. We know that there are often extenuating circumstances and reasons *why* we do sinful things. There are also always reasons why we fail to do *good* things. We confess these acts and omissions as sins today because we have together disfigured the image of God in us and in the world. We have chosen comfort over challenge, ease over holiness of life again and again; we choose the easy way over the wise path, the quick fix over good stewardship, and silence over courage as a way of life.

We can call it original sin or self-centeredness. Theologians have long identified Pride as the root sin – or some version of hubris. Much less attention has been paid to its close cousin, shame. We are learning that sin and shame are twin sides of the same original coin. Pride is feeling overly good about ourselves; shame is being overly despairing. Ash

Wednesday reminds us that we are all somewhere in the middle, all the time. We are human, from the earth, hummous.

*Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.* We do a lot of remembering today. We remember our mortality and our past unfaithfulness. We also remember who else we are. God creates us for a much higher destiny than dust and ashes. We remember God's gracious gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ. We remember that we are children of grace from cradle to grave and beyond. We remember that we can make other choices than the ones we have made. Like the Prodigal Son in a far off land, we can come to our senses, and come home to a loving God who longs for our return. We remember that God loves us not because of any merit of our own, but because God cannot *not* love us. It would be against God's nature.

Here on Ash Wednesday we re-constitute, re-assemble, re-member our identity, our self-hood and anchor it in God's grace made known in Christ, rather than in our own merits (or our shortcomings). We remember our fallenness *and* our forgiven-ness. We re-member our very selves - mind, body, and soul - in Christ.

In Matthew's gospel tonight, the only thing Jesus condemns in the piety of the hypocrites is doing it entirely for show, so as to be seen and praised by others. Jesus criticizes the religious leaders for this time and again. But there is nothing shameful about seeking to draw closer to God. We can be so self-conscious about appearing hypocritical that we

hold back from doing what is beneficial for our souls. There isn't much social benefit or status to be gained by being openly religious these days – if anything, the opposite in our secular city. We are all somewhere in the middle between pure hypocrisy and the full stature of Christ. So let us not rush to wash off our ashes too soon. Let us not be ashamed of our ashes or our desire to live a holy life.

Finally, some wise words for Lent that are variously attributed but most likely original to Arthur Lichtenberger, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church from 1958-1964. You may have heard them before, or some variation. If not, they are wonderful reminders for Lent:

*Fast from criticism, and Feast on praise;*

*Fast from self-pity, and Feast on joy;*

*Fast from ill temper, and Feast on peace;*

*Fast from resentment, and Feast on contentment;*

*Fast from jealousy, and Feast on humility;*

*Fast from pride, and Feast on love;*

*Fast from selfishness, and Feast on service;*

*Fast from fear, and Feast on faith.*

What are you going to feast on this Lent? Praise, joy, peace, contentment, humility, love, service, faith... Which of these joys will be your feast? Someone I know commits to sending notes of appreciation during Lent to those who have played a significant part in her spiritual journey over the past year: this is how she fasts from criticism and feasts on praise. Someone else I know gives up his Saturdays to serve at a food pantry. This is how he fasts from selfishness and feasts on service.

Someone else gives her unnecessary clothing to the Thrift Shop to feast on contentment. Someone else gives up Twitter and Snapchat; this is how he feasts on peace. What will be your feast this Lent? How will you fast so that you can feast and rejoice in God's sufficiency and love for you and all whom God has made?

AMEN





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