

KGL+
Sermon
Trinity Church Boston
Ash Wednesday
February 22, 2023

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Being human is immensely inconvenient, I've discovered.

We are constrained by bodies which do not always function in the way we wish; a notable lack of time and imagination and vision to see above the weeds which always seem to surround us; and all of the feelings we have and carry around with us-- feelings about ourselves and the world and the past and the future and the ones we love and the ones we have trouble loving, feelings about our feelings, and feelings about the feelings of others.

Add in that our bodies require us to stop what we are doing every few hours to refuel; that we require time off to reboot and sleep. That cold and heat in excess affect us, and we must adjust. We need precious time to think. We often find that those feelings which we have in abundance can no longer be constrained, and so they come out of our bodies in the form of tears, or sweat, or swears.

Of course AI Chatbots are all the rage these days—they don't require space and time to consider their words. They don't worry about paying rent on time. Those programs don't need sleep or food or bathroom breaks. They produce without limitations, without requirements, without sacrifice.

It's a mercy that humanity gets anything done given how cumbersome we truly are.

And today, we remind ourselves of that truth—of the deep inconvenience of our limited humanity.

On the Sunday before Lent, we read scripture about the unveiling of God—the removal of what keeps us apart from the Holy One, from our Creator. In the story of the Transfiguration, Jesus takes three of his disciples up the mountain and there on the mountain he is met by Moses and Elijah who flank him, and in that moment Jesus is transformed into a dazzling figure. In that moment, we have a moment to glimpse God as God is in the person of Jesus—God in community, God made manifest to community, and God undoing our sense of what God looks like. In those scriptures, we were, and are, invited to be transformed, not as Jesus was into radiance- for that is not our vocation as humans; but rather transformed as the disciples were transformed. As they looked on Jesus in that moment of revealing— they and we were invited into a deeper knowledge of God: of God as God was, and as God is, and as God will always be. And that image of God which we receive in that moment, was of God as more God than we can imagine.

On Ash Wednesday, only days after witnessing the Transfiguration, we are invited to deconstruct everything we feel about being human. Our mortality is placed before our eyes, imprinted on our foreheads exactly where the chrism of baptism, where God's claim on us, was placed. And in that moment, we are asked to consider what about us is eternal and what is mortal—to recognize that we are not divine beings, but rather Christ-bearers ourselves.

And yet, we would prefer to imagine ourselves as gods, friends—gods, with a 'small g'. Infallible. In control. All knowing.

Imagine the disappointments we feel regularly when we recognize that we are not gods, nor God. Imagine how often we try to cover up our inconvenient humanity because it is too vulnerable to expose to the open air and eyes of the world. Imagine, if you will, the defensiveness that comes when our expectations are of divinity, and yet our capabilities are of dusty, not-quite-there, fleshy humans. In that thin moment we begin to recognize our own growing edges:

We see that our love of neighbor has not always been disinterested;
That our zeal for righteousness leaves room for our own self-satisfaction;
That we are more than ready to note the errors of others, yet ignore the sins of our own doing;
That we would rather compete than collaborate;
That our fear overrides our love;
That what we aspire towards, and what we act on, can have a chasm of intentions gone awry in the midst of them.

I consider Ash Wednesday to be one of the most radical days of the church year. On it, we are invited not to hide our limitations away—nor to revel in them as some sort of existential excuse to leave the world the way it is. On this day, we are invited to divest our need to be in control at all times. On this day, we are invited to drop the façade of being on top of it all. On this day, this weekday, this work-day, we pause our lives and routines, and we come into this space and remind ourselves that our hardest work is in letting go of what we imagine is important, and choosing to claim what is God-given.

We receive ashes on our foreheads, which will inevitably be imperfect in imposition, drifting down our noses throughout the day, wiping off on our sleeves at inopportune times, confusing people in the office or on the T or in our homes. We will kneel at the altar rail together, acknowledging that we are hungry, and accepting that we cannot sate it by ourselves, as the slightly bent wafer and wholesale jug wine approach our outstretched hands and lips.

What we offer here today in the church is the same as what we can offer as humans: imperfect offerings given to God.

And sometimes acknowledging those imperfections allows God to actually enter into the wafer, enter into the wine, enter into the hard-pressed kneelers, the shaking hand, the crooked ashy cross, the messiness of feelings and tears and sweat and swears, and the undoing of our god-like aspirations and intentions.

We shine light in places of vulnerability and shame and fear this season. And in the process, we begin to rest more fully in the truth that we are beloved anyways and beloved *because*-- because we are God's and nothing, NOTHING can separate us from that love. The light which we shine is not to place us in a line up, but rather imagine it as a search party—God seeking us out, searching diligently for us, and even when we feel too well hidden, and that light will continue to comb the fields and forests and dark corners because we are each part of God. A 2nd century Church Father, Irenaeus wrote one of my favorite descriptions of this: “The glory of God is a human being, fully alive.” And what it takes to be fully alive is to acknowledge our vulnerabilities and limited vision, our very dustiness incarnate, and proclaim at the same time our belovedness in God.

This year, the invitation into a holy Lent might be a reminder to each of us that we are not meant to be AI Chatbots, only replicating and reiterating— but allowing that the imperfect may be exactly what Christ-bearers, such as us, are meant to be. Not gods. Not divine beings. But dusty, finite humans, trusting themselves to be molded in the hands of a God whose very locus of power is in creating and loving us and redeeming us.

Amen.