

Facing Repentance

A school shooting tests Ash Wednesday's invitation to reconciliation

A sermon by The Rev. Drew Downs
Lent 1B | Mark 1:9-15
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I had a really good sermon on Tuesday. It was pretty funny...and serious. It was about the gospel reading and the prayer book. I weaved together Jesus's call for repentance and its central place as a Lenten theme. And then showed where we find it in our liturgy. I felt really good about it...on Tuesday night.

It was Wednesday, after our noon service and I was coming back from campus a second time, having shared ashes and the call to observe a Holy Lent with so many people when I heard about a shooting in Parkland, Florida. Seventeen people were murdered.

And that night Rose showed me a picture.

It was a picture of a frightened mother with fresh ashes on her forehead.

I couldn't look. I was so angry.

This is Ash Wednesday. And St. Valentine's Day. Ashes and martyrs. Are you kidding me?

Ashes

I refused to look long at the picture, but it was etched in my mind. It was still there the next day.

And what I couldn't shake was the thought of what she had just received in church.

When those ashes were smeared across her forehead, she heard the words

"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

You are dust.

And I wondered if she was having the thought that I was having.

"I was told to remember that I am dust. It wasn't my daughter's name. It wasn't my son's name. I was told that I am dust and to dust shall I return."

And if it were any number of churches not named St. Stephen's in Terre Haute, Indiana, she probably heard a message of personal piety. Maybe sticking to the almsgiving or prayer discussed in the gospel.

Or maybe she heard about mortality and the frailty of life.

Or if she were really lucky, she heard about how we are all connected. Maybe that these ashes remind her, not just of her own mortality, but of her connection to God and all of creation. That we all come from the earth and to the earth we all return. Maybe she heard that.

But what did she make of that message after her child was shot by another person's child?

And what did she make of that message when she found out the other child has no parents?

Would any of this comfort her?

Remembering

I don't know what church she went to on Wednesday. But if it were Episcopal, I definitely know she would have been invited to keep a Holy Lent. You can find this invitation **on the handout** for the previous sermon in the back. Or you can find it on **page 264** of *the Book of Common Prayer*.

She would have heard that we are entering a season in which we prepare newcomers *and* prepare for reconciliation those who have committed notorious sins.

Would she remember this call to restoration?

Would she remember the part where the community would actively seek to restore the lost? Is that in her mind? Would she wonder if this young man who murdered her child would ever be forgiven? Or how she may have to look him in the face and see a beloved child of God?

Calling it all crazy

According to The Guardian, this was "the eighth shooting to have resulted in death or injury during the first seven weeks of the year."

That is the craziest sentence I've ever written. And I've written some doozies. That we can parse between shootings which hurt people and those which don't is incredible. As incredible as the ratio: more than one per week.

Crazy, like the statement Austin Eubanks, a survivor of the Columbine massacre made last year:

"We're lessening the threshold of how crazy someone needs to be to commit a mass shooting."

Remembering that we're dust seems to be having a sanguine effect on us. *C'est la vie*, I guess.

Far from the bonfire preaching in the Sermon on the Mount from which the Ash Wednesday gospel comes. The call to get to work, building up and preparing for the Kin-dom. Everyone's saying there's nothing we can do and Jesus is literally saying to us this morning:

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

And last Sunday we heard God say on the mountaintop:

"This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

The time is already, the kin-dom is near, repent, and get on board.

Need

The hard thing about repentance and reconciliation is that we need other people to be involved. We can't do it ourselves. As much as we might want to.

The woman in the photograph has no reason to be thinking about forgiving this murderer this morning. Her grief and pain is raw and needs consoling.

But that pain isn't the only factor. She shouldn't be alone. Expecting forgiveness and reconciliation to grow from the hurt in the midst of mourning makes about as much sense as expecting my kids to draw up the schematics for the next Ford sedan before going to bed tonight.

The community is called to help her in her grief and give her support. Just like the community must be responsible for protecting other children. And yes, the community must work to rehabilitate its broken

members, even those committing murder, that they may be whole again. That we might be whole again.

Tearing open

The gospel does not encourage us to throw up our hands but to get 'em dirty.

And Mark, more than the others, communicates how important it is. In these 6 verses, the writer gives us mountains of information, like decades of photo albums to wade through, but speeds past them saying *That's the past. This is the present.* This present: Jesus proclaims the kin-dom is breaking in. God's tearing apart the separation between heaven and earth.

This is now. Get with the program already. It's like Mario passing the first flag—you don't get to go back to the first part of the level. This is where we are now.

Everything else in light of that is a lame excuse to avoid getting with the program today.

Making a safer world for our children, building relationships and tearing down the fences which separate us—the sin manifest in concrete or wire—beating swords into plowshares and bringing hope in a time of hopelessness: that's the program Jesus is writing.

Each step, a move toward reconciling the world, a rewriting of the whole ordering of the cosmos. Every exorcism, healing, teaching, gets us closer. Listening and believing:

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

The time is already here, God is with us, so turn away from death, condemn it, and turn toward God. And then follow Jesus.

And if you do this, you won't be alone. The dark won't consume you. Come, be with us. And together, we can make the love of God shine brighter than the darkness of this world. Gathering our voices in a vibrant kin-dom jubilee.

Together we can rebuild our love. Together we can restore our love. In us, through us, to all of us.