

## ASH WEDNESDAY 2009

Sermon February 25, 2009

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I've had a subscription to the New Yorker magazine for over 50 years. Much of the time I don't find much to read in it—but, as you know if you've heard me preach on Sundays, I do like the cartoons. I think it was in the New Yorker where I saw the cartoon showing a middle-aged couple sitting in two chairs that faced away from each other at about a ninety degree angle. The woman (looking not terribly pleased) turns toward the man and says, "Quit referring to me as your Lenten discipline!"

It's left up to us to figure out the rest of that conversation, but it doesn't sound as if it's what the church has in mind about what we should be doing in Lent. Actually there's a lot that's said about Lent which doesn't jibe with reality. But somehow or another I think we're close to getting it straight this year. For if there ever was a time when we need to be serious about ourselves, and honest about the world we live in, it's now.

It occurred to me while I was writing this short sermon that this country has been on an economic playground for a long time. It has been like it was when I put one of my children or grandchildren on a swing, and as I was pushing, they would always say, "higher!" "higher!" And we all pushed the swings higher, and the merry-go-round faster.

It may be that the truths of Ash Wednesday are what need to be heard in the playgrounds we have enjoyed for so long. It's time to come to terms with ourselves and the world we have created before God. The essential truth, and gift, of Ash Wednesday, and the Sundays of Lent is the opportunity they give to explore that subject—us- at a time when we need it the most. Ash Wednesday says what so much of modern culture denies, namely that we human beings are forever like the woman in another New Yorker cartoon I've mentioned before—looking in the mirror and saying, "Mirror, Mirror, Lie to me!!"

The answer to that might be "be careful what you wish for." For those familiar with Alcoholics Anonymous and other Twelve Step programs, Ash Wednesday is like a giant, pull-out-all the stops Step Four "We make a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves."

That of course is different from what has gone on in the wake of what we might call our country's long-running Mardi Gras.

I'll give the President credit—he is asking us to not just busy ourselves examining others and trying to assign blame to others for the mess we're in. I believe it was C.S. Lewis who said something like, "Hell is a place where everyone has a complaint and makes it ceaselessly."

That won't change things. The invitation to Ash Wednesday is a different one. It is to fast from our self-justifications, complaints, blame-games and take a good, hard, honest look at ourselves. This is as difficult as it is odd in contemporary culture. "Mirror, lie to me?" Another writer, Janet Malcolm, observes, "we are all perpetually smoothing and arranging reality to conform to our wishes." Ash Wednesday says, "Give it up. Listen when the story is told truthfully. "

Name your part in the evils you deplore, not just self-scrutiny but as a community of people, What we have most in common as human beings is our sin, as old-fashioned as that may sound: our failure to be who we have been made to be and called to be. What we have most in common is our need for mercy.

And it is from that need that we come to the altar tonight to receive a cross on our foreheads with ashes burned from symbolically the same palms strewn in the path of Jesus as he rode into his paradoxical triumph of death on the Cross.

I suggest tonight that Ash Wednesday is a time to begin "spring training" for living a fuller, more complete life. You can call it a time of repentance, a "turn-around time". For there is no question that there are some "Troubled Assets" in our situations today.

I guess we all realize that the days are getting longer and daylight savings time is just ten days away now. In this time of "lengthening of days", from which the season of Lent derives its name, we can use this period to begin balancing the weight of business and personal pressures-- to discover, right there in the midst of problems that won't go away, a quality of life that is measured in a different way.

That quality, that essence of the Christian life is found, my friends, not just acknowledging our shortcomings, as we do on Ash Wednesday and in Lent, but in finding strength for living. So we put ashes on our foreheads as a symbol of penitence, and recognition of our human mortality. And then we are charged by St. Matthew, in his Gospel for this day, to wash our faces—to be renewed and refreshed for discovering new meaning in the tasks and opportunities that lie ahead for all of us. AMEN!