

Selecting A Lenten Practice: An Ash Wednesday Sermon

*Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 103:8-14; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-21*

7:30 a.m. February 17, 2010

Trinity Episcopal Church, Aurora, IL

The Rev. Charles A. de Kay

In Jesus' holy name. Amen.

Please be seated.

Good morning!

Nothing lasts forever. Or at least nothing human. We all die. Every last one of us. None of us was built to be immortal. We all come with an expiration date.

My friends, there's nothing like death to remind us how important it is **to live**, to live life abundantly, to live right. There's no wiggle room in the finality of death. There's no getting around it. In a culture that values escapism and denial, there's no escaping or denying our end or that of those we love.

In the face of death, we get real pretty quick. All pretence and hypocrisy becomes transparent. When a loved one dies, once we have moved beyond numbness, grief strips us bare, leaving us vulnerable; naked and real. In the presence of death, integrity, character, and love are what count. As for the rest . . . the distractions . . . well, they simply don't stand the test of time.

I cannot experience Ash Wednesday today (perhaps I never will) without remembering seven years ago. Ash Wednesday 2003. I was a second-year seminarian, returning to my "normal" life having walked with my father – my last living parent – to the end. I watched as the life ebbed out of him, torturously slowly. During that time which felt as if I was living underwater, the world somehow went on anyway – it seemed strange and unjust; yet there it was. The television was all ablaze with different color terror alerts. On one of the last days my father had moments of real lucidity, there was a larger-than-life anti-war demonstration right outside his Manhattan door, while Colin Powell presented "evidence" at the United Nations that Iraq had been stockpiling weapons of mass destruction. Just as he had at Woodstock, Ritchie Havens played "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child" as I slipped across the street to get supplies from the deli. There were tens of thousands of people in the street that day. It felt almost as if the world had come to his doorstep to howl in protest at the injustice of his illness. It was a surreal time. Eventually God allowed my father to slip his mortal coil; two weeks later we buried his ashes in his favorite cigar box; I turned 40 and returned to seminary, my family atomized, blown apart by the loss of the old man.

New life can -- and often does -- spring out of the soil fertilized by death. On Ash Wednesday, 2003, I preached for the second time, at my field education site, truly becoming a pastor for the first time. My wife Christina came into my life, and, as of last night, we've come to agree that our first date was Ash Wednesday. God can be gracious. Although, God knows, in the face of such real, heart-wrenching, life-twisting loss, it can be hard to see it in the moment. Many of you have similar stories of your own, some no doubt more shattering than mine. Some of you may be in the midst of it.

As we enter into Lent today, Ash Wednesday, and put on the blessed ashes of mourning and penitence, many of us begin a time of spiritual discipline. Following the prophet Joel's advice, I invite you to engage in something that helps you *to turn back to the Lord with all your heart*. Listening to St. Paul, I encourage you *to begin today*, for now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation. Don't waste another minute! And finally, walking the path our Savior laid out for us in the section of the Sermon on the Mount we just heard, I urge you to *Be Real*. Enter into something that puts you in touch

with the things that last. Let go of the ways and the stuff that you do to impress other people, and pay attention to looking good to God.

Now, the season of Lent is a time of taking stock of our lives. And sometimes it helps to make a personal confession to clear away the stumbling blocks we've put in our own path, to re-orient ourselves toward God. Sometimes, when we want to look good to God, we have to ask God to forgive our mistakes, our selfish and self-seeking choices. The really extraordinary good news is that God will ALWAYS forgive us, if we are real, if we are genuine, if we can summon the courage to put our lives back where they belong – where in reality they rest anyway – in God's hands. So, I am setting aside time on Wednesday mornings in Lent, after our morning service and bible study, to hear confessions. My door will be open for you. It's not just a cliché: *Confession truly is good for the soul.*

Whether your spiritual path takes you to a place where you're trying something on that you've never tried before, like fasting or starting your weekdays with Morning Prayer, or whether you're planning to return to a familiar Lenten discipline, like giving up chocolate – again! – or attending our Wednesday morning service, wherever you're called, Be true to yourself. Remember that character, integrity and love – the building blocks of faith, hope, and love – are what lasts. When it's all over, these are treasures that moths and rust do not consume, nor any thief can take away. Consider, dear friends, doing something this Lent that might nurture and grow a deepening of one of these.

Wherever your spiritual journey may be taking you, I pray your experience of Lent may be holy and blessed. May it transform you to a new readiness to greet our risen Lord at Easter on April 4<sup>th</sup>. In Jesus' holy name. Amen.