

February 14, 2024

Ash Wednesday

The Reverend Joseph Kimmel
St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21



On television recently, there's been a popular commercial for a personal injury law firm: the commercial features a man who constantly desires "more." It doesn't matter what the object in question is; he just wants more. In one scene, for instance, the man is out at a fancy Italian restaurant having dinner with his family. His pasta arrives at the table, and the waiter asks if he would like some hand-grated parmesan cheese. He vigorously nods "yes," and then the waiter proceeds to start grinding the cheese over his plate. Every few seconds the waiter asks the customer "More?" And to each question, the man eagerly indicates "Yes," until he is literally buried in a giant mountain of parmesan cheese. The message conveyed by this law-firm commercial is that "of course"—"naturally"—in any area of life, but especially when it comes to a financial settlement, it's just "obvious" that we would want "more": why would you settle for less parmesan cheese when you can have more? Why would you settle for less monetary compensation when the law firm can get you more?

Tonight is Ash Wednesday, the first evening of Lent, an extremely countercultural season of the Church year which invites us to venture out beyond our society's acquisitive, materialistic addiction to "more," in order to discover and enjoy richer, freer, fuller, deeper Life. For nearly 2000 years, Christians have commemorated this season of Lent, the forty days (not counting Sundays) preceding Easter, by taking time to step out of the hustle-and-bustle flow of ordinary life, to reassess priorities, to take stock of where true Life, divine Life might lie, and how we each might access and enjoy that Life more fully.

Often this Lenten season comes draped with certain unpleasant associations: a time of fasting and penitence and regret over sins, maudlin imagery of a bloody Christ hanging on the cross accompanied by the guilt-trip message that Jesus endured his torturous suffering "for our sins." Because of such associations, Lent by-and-large has suffered a pretty bad rap: it commonly gets misunderstood as the season of sin, the weeks-long obsession with guilt, and the uncomfortable period when we each are supposed to "give something up." "What are you giving up for Lent?" is the foremost question tied to this time of year. And because of all these factors, we might well feel some discomfort with Lent and misperceive it as an ascetic, gloomy, death-focused liturgical gray-zone that we just need to push through in order to reach Easter's sunny skies and lily fields.

“Au contraire,” I want to emphasize in tonight’s brief homily. In Lent, yes, we do tend to focus our spiritual attention on Christ’s steady movement towards the cross. But we do not do so in some kind of perverse glorification of guilt, suffering, and death. Rather we celebrate Christ’s giving up of his life—and maybe even relinquish some small pleasures within our own lives—not to exalt ascetism or suffering per se, but in order to cultivate real Life, true Life. In Lent, we set aside time—40 days—out of the year’s busy flow to boldly proclaim that true Life, the Life we most deeply desire, the Life promised to us in Christ does not consist in the constant acquisition of more. Contrary to the superficiality of our society’s values, in this season of Lent, we voice our conviction that joyful Life, the Life we were created for, does not consist in how much we can acquire but actually in just the opposite. Following the example of our Savior, who in dying to his earthly life discovered the indescribable joys of resurrected existence, we too choose to affirm that it is in giving up our possessions that we become rich, in setting aside our rights that we become free, in laying down our lives—whether literally or more often by surrendering our time, energy, or resources for the sake of others—that we truly live.

So rather than viewing this Lenten season as a rather awkward and morose period that we just need to push through in order to reach Easter, I invite us instead to recognize the countercultural opportunities this season extends to us. How might our lives really benefit from not seeking “more” for a change but learning to live with less? Concretely, this could look like anything from skipping one meal a week to limiting our time on social media or in front of our phones, computers, or TVs and instead devoting that time to meditation or prayer or yoga or some other life-enriching spiritual activity. Far from being just a gloomy time of death, Lent actually can be our season of coming more fully alive, discovering new depths of the joyous Life God desires for us by making the time and space needed to see that our present life is not all there is: to see, echoing Garrett’s sermon from last Sunday, that the life we’ve been living up to now is not, and need not be, our whole story. There’s still so much Life (with a capital L) to be discovered and cultivated.

And so I wonder: in contrast to the commercial’s parmesan cheese man, where in your life might you discover a richness and a savoriness not by adding more but actually by embracing less? In what way—small though it may seem—might you cut back,

restrict, limit, take or do less, in order to make time and space for the fullness of Life available in Christ Jesus?

I pray we each may have the courage this Lent to resist our culture's addiction to the superficial More in order to discover the life-giving, soul-deepening dimensions of Less. Amen.