Ash Wednesday March 1, 2017

All Saints’ Year A

Isaiah 58:1-12 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Psalm 51 Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Create is us, dear Lord, clean hearts. Amen.

Do you remember the nursery rhyme:

Ring around the rosies, a pocket full of posies, Ashes, Ashes, we all fall down.

It’s an ancient song, a nursery rhyme, turned into a playground singing game.

The song may be rooted in a Celtic tradition, emerging in Ireland even before Christianity reached the British Isles.

I remember laughing a lot while we played it. We even threw in a sneeze or two and then we lowered ourselves as far as we could go down on one leg without falling…. the one who fell first would then be placed in the center and we would circle again.

I never thought of it as morbid… but it is!

Historians tell us that it may have become a song sung during the Great Plague that struck London in the mid 17th century, the last outbreak of the Black Death that had devastated Europe for three centuries…. Over 50 million died, in some places up to 60% of the population.

Ring around the rosies….. first sign of the plague was flushed rose colored cheeks… death was ringing around you.

A pocket full of posies….. herbs that were carried in pockets as a way to defend against the disease.

Ashes, Ashes….. a sneeze was another sign of the plague…. And your body began to turn black, into ash…And indeed if that happened, you were toast, all falling down.

When the Black Death hit London in 1665, as the last hurrah of the Plague, within 18 months, 100,000 people died, a quarter of the city’s population.

Imagine if the Plague were to hit Peterborough? Within 18 months, about 1800 of us would die. And if we follow the London pattern, those who would have died would have been mostly working class, the poor, the immobile, the uninsured, the disenfranchised.

So who’s singing the song? Is it the ones who think they are safe from the disease? That somehow their privilege protects them, so they are making fun of death, a mockery of the “unfortunate souls” damned by God, because of course that’s how people viewed it… You died of the plague, you were being punished by God; if you lived through the plague, you were blessed by God. You sang the song as your own personal pocket full of posies, a talisman of sorts, protecting you from dying a horrific death. Probably because you were able to leave town… fast.

Or is someone singing one of those truths that come to us out of the mouth of babes….. life is fragile, even cruel, and ***we are all*** susceptible to life’s ravages, no matter what. And ***we all fall down***. All of us. If there is injustice anywhere, there is injustice everywhere. If there is poverty, hunger, pain, and fear of random death striking anywhere in our community, then it is everywhere in our community. And whatever you do, don’t leave. Become as Isaiah urges us to be, like the spring of water that never fails, the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

I hope that I live out of this truth, such a right spirit, that its veracity of clarity sings out of the mouth of babes. Yet, I know I am susceptible to taking refuge in my own privilege, wanting to save my life and the lives of my loved ones, and to run from danger. We all are susceptible to that impulse.

And I think that’s why Ash Wednesday is the way we start our Lenten practice of reflection repentance, renewal.

“Remember that you”…….. here’s the gift we need to name over and over again…. You…. You are God’s beloved child, in whom God is well-pleased. You are so special, God created the world with you, actually only you in mind. God created the world and its entire splendor for you. There’s no greater gift than God’s unending abiding love for you, just as you are.

And then we continue…..“Remember that you….. are dust, and to dust you shall return.” We hold the reality of God’s crazy wild and passionate love for us simultaneously within the hands of humility. Your life means everything and also your life is insignificant in the scheme of the overarching universe.

It is here, within this impossible paradox of truth that you are everything and nothing, we can let go and let God. Jesus, the king of dispassion, holds on greatly to the power of love and life, of God’s kingdom reigning now, while at the same time letting it all go, willing to die for his friends, for us.

Simply put, this is what it means to follow Jesus. To follow him into the wilderness and to pray for Jesus’ new and right spirit of compassion and love to descend upon us, the good and the bad. May your will be done, dear Lord.

And yet, we fail all the time to walk into the wilderness with Jesus. We are weak, slow to remember that the “fast” of our lives is to put ourselves into God’s hands, just as Jesus did. But that’s ok. Because, every time we fail, we have yet again, another opportunity to return and to remember to pray to love these right things. Of course, as Jesus reminds us, what we love will be where we find our hearts.

Ash Wednesday is the reminder that we are really called to one thing: to want to be known by God, to be shaped by God’s love. And to trust that in our desire to claim these right things, God will carry us there.

As God desires us, we desire to desire God back, to walk with Jesus, no matter where it takes us. It’s that simple and that difficult.

Thank goodness, we walk this walk together. We all fall down, indeed, and as Paul reminds us, “We are impostors, and yet we are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see-- we are alive; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.”

With God, we all rise up renewed with waters that never fail because we have opened ourselves up to be known by God and to trust that God’s light will rise in our the darkness and liberate us to see.