

Rev. Kate LeFranc

Preached at Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church on Ash Wednesday, February 18, 2015

“Happy Ash Wednesday”

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

So, happy Ash Wednesday!

... It's not quite the right thing to say, is it. But then it's not much of a holiday, either; at least not in the way we're used to holidays. We're not celebrating anything, and we're not observing the anniversary of anything, and there wasn't a "first Ash Wednesday" back many years ago that we're remembering, either.

Today is a marker of changing seasons; it's a turning from one thing to another; and if it's a holiday at all it's sort of a dismal one. It's a celebration of sin and death, as paradoxical as that feels and sounds.

Our mortality is usually a pretty touchy subject. We don't like being reminded of the fact that we're growing older or will eventually die – in fact we have build up entire industries around trying to pretend that we're immortal, from the anti-aging skin creams to plastic surgeries that lift and tuck to funeral practices that inject bodies full of chemicals to avoid confronting us with actual dead flesh. We understand that someday we'll have to die, but we'd really rather not dwell on what that means, thankyouverymuch.

And we treat our whole lives that way, sometimes: if something is good, it should go on forever! If a group or a project or a company is worthwhile, it should be growing! Always and forever, if something isn't making more money or attracting more people or claiming an ever-larger market share, we're doing something wrong.

That's the story we tell ourselves, and so we stay up nights worrying, and stress ourselves out, and tighten our belts in fear because *something bad is going to happen*; and it smells of death but we can't look straight at it because we can't admit that death is real; and so it is a faceless, unnamed terror that keeps us up at night and haunts our waking lives in every decision we make out of fear for the future.

But today we look that monster in the face: yes, death, I see you. I know you're there and I'm choosing today not to be scared of you.

We are made of dust, and that is nothing to be ashamed of. God our creator scooped up that very dust from the earth and formed us with love; knowing that we would be fragile creatures and someday (in the blink of God's eye) we would crumble back into the dust from where we came, God created us anyway. Knowing that we would try and then fail, try again, fail again, and then die, God *still* thought we were worth creating.

We, dust-creatures, will find and do beautiful things and joyous things and awe-inspiring things along our way, and then those things will pass away just like we will pass away. And today is a day to remind ourselves that this is okay.

We can let go, today, of the gnawing fear of not being enough, not being perfect, not being immortal. Knowing that nothing we do will ever beat death, or suffering, or loss, we can be free to let go of our fears and grow closer to God in this season. Knowing that we will find brokenness and probably failure, we can take the time during Lent to look honestly at our lives, and make the choice, again and again, to throw out those things that distract us from God's presence and keep us from being the people God calls us to be.

And, you know, we'll fail at that too – we'll forget to do our devotions one day, or sneak some chocolate, or get distracted and pray half-heartedly some days – and that's okay. This season is not about *being* perfect, or even about being better. It's about *trying* to do better. And trying means it's okay if we fail sometimes, but the key is trying *again*.

This Lenten season, if we let it, can be a time of honesty with ourselves and with God. It can be a time to let ourselves truly see the broken places in our lives, and then prune those dead branches back so something new can grow. It is hard to take the first step – to really look at that ignored, messy corner where all the junk piles up – but once we look, we can throw the broken things away to make room for something better.

Friends, happy Ash Wednesday. We're all going to die. And in that truth, we are made free to let go of our fears and love one another and love God as the broken creatures that we are.