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Ash Wednesday 2023
Grace, River Forest

Assembly of the Needy

A community of the wounded. That is how the late Michael Gerson described what he experienced during a hospitalization for clinical depression. He said “You meet other patients, from entirely different backgrounds, who share your symptoms, creating a community of the wounded. And you learn of the valor they show in lonely rooms.”

My own life has been shaped by those who have found their way to alcoholics anonymous. Those who felt as they were sinking- left to their own devices. In those church basements people acknowledge that they are powerless over their addiction. That they cannot save themselves. I’m thankful for those I know who are in recovery. Through their lives I get a glimpse into what they have found. You might call it a community of the wounded.

In both places- with others hospitalized for mental illness or in AA, it seems that one of the markers of these communities is truth. Truth about your biology, your situation, your addiction, your life. And the truth that you need help in one way or another. And asking for help is a sign of great strength and power. Admitting weakness is admirable.

On this day we have a shared marker. One that is traced on our brow. Not hidden away but out for all to see. An ashen cross. And the words spoken over all of us are the same “remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

It is not so much that Ash Wednesday creates a community of the wounded, but that we remind each other in stark relief that we all belong to it. We could call it a community of the dying. A group that would encompass all of our human family and even non human creatures. You and me.

How often we forget our membership in it or try to escape it. We long to be a part of any group but this.

There is something that pulls us away from its orbit. David in Psalm 51 puts words to it. Our sin is ever before us. Curved inward by its lure we cling to our possessions, our jobs, our perceived competence, our agendas, our self-centered schemes and shady attempts at security. And we cling, white knuckled to the lie of self sufficiency, that needing help is weak, and the lie of our immortality. Walking wounded yet trying to disguise ourselves in a million outfits. We even hide under the banner of piety and religion as Jesus articulates. We love to practice it before others as a part of our own self-salvation projects. Justifying ourselves by how good, right, and together we are. We think we do not need anything. Our confession articulates the length we go storing up treasures on earth where moths and rust destroy and thieves break in and steal.

Still we hear the truth from the prophet Joel, “Return to the LORD, your God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast, covenant keeping and sure love.” A love that is more broad and spacious than even the confession we made earlier.

Return to the one who created you today and throughout this Lenten pilgrimage. Let this truth make you free. Let the shackles fall and take your seat in the community of the wounded once again. The assembly of the needy. The hiding and pretending can end. For the God of life is always here inviting you into liberation. From yourselves and your sin so you can really live.

As the oil was traced over your brow in the shape of a cross in baptism you took your place in the community of the wounded, the family of all those who have died to sin and all its empty promises. You were raised up with Christ. You are beloved. You are forgiven. You belong. Just as you are. In your frail and finite flesh especially when you fail and fail again. For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Truth himself, who makes this community possible, calls us to learn the rhythms of those who as Paul says are dying yet alive. With open hands and eyes on our neighbors the Lenten practices of prayer, fasting, and works of love all invite us to return to our Father in Heaven. Finding our treasure there. May you even find in Christ the gift of asking for help. Reveling in your neediness.

At the Morton Arboretum recently I saw an art installation that looked as if it was large and sturdy tree branches in the shape of large arms. The way it was made it invited people to lean, fall into it and sit there. Letting it hold you up.

Throughout these forty days let the cross be that for you. Fall into its most noble limbs and make your home there. Let the grace that flows from his wounded side make you new each day. And in your return may you find yourself at last beholding the tree of life as you marvel at his dying and rising that gives life at last to every corner of creation and every fiber of our being.

Until then may we dare to even find joy in being a part of the community of the wounded, marked with the cross and living in its embrace.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

