

Ash Wednesday Year C 2019

Katharine has a client for whom she does some gardening work. This morning she called Katharine early enough to wake us up. We slept a little late after a day of carnival reveling. She's a little hard of hearing, Katharine's client, so she speaks loudly, and I could hear her on Katharine's phone asking if Katharine would be able to work on her garden this week. Katharine told her that our granddaughter Emery was out of school this week, Mardi Gras break, and that, because we are babysitting, it would be next week before she could attend to her. I could hear the lady say... that her grandchildren went to Catholic School, and that they were required to return to school on Ash Wednesday, because as she said, 'you know, the Catholics have to put their ashes on them.'

And I thought, no. those are our ashes.... Brothers and sisters, we spend so much of our life's energy, as T.S. Eliot puts it," shoring up fragments, bits and pieces of what we presume to be eternal, against our ruin": wealth, happiness, children, success, affirmation. It's a long list. We spend a great deal of our psychic capital, if you will, looking for a counterpoint to our mortality.... But alas, there is always a reckoning with the truth of the matter; that all of our illusions, all of what we shore up against our ruin, turn to ash and dust.

Today is the day in the life of the church in which we stare our illusions in the face, and embrace the truth of the matter; that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. That we die in short. Artists know that contrast is essential to the evocation of beauty. That's true in literature. It's true in music. It's true in our spiritual journey. Ash Wednesday, and Lent and Good Friday is the owning up to the dark of our spiritual pilgrimage. It's when we recognize that life is dark and light, and that one can't be without the other. Ash Wednesday is the contrast in the liturgical palette of the church, and without it all the bright feasting of the church is meaningless.

"Death is the Mother of Beauty," says Wallace Stevens. The longer I live the more I believe that's true. Perhaps to be in touch with life's transience and mutability engenders an appreciation for its marvels.... Maybe it is simply a matter of the freedom that comes with honesty; the freedom of living in the truth. But today I simply want to ask you a question to ponder this Lent. What is it that germinates in the ashes of your soul? What beauty lies in wait in spite of your ruin? These are questions that can't be so much asked, but lived....And they require our most.... Courage, honesty, persistence, and Love. Those are the virtues of our baptismal journey.

There is an irony in all of this, of course. And I think God has a peculiar fancy for showing up in irony... God appears in the oblique angles of our peripheral vision. And the irony, or an irony is this: We claim and lament, and in a counter-intuitive way, celebrate our mortality this day. But it is not really death that we fear... Our fear is life... to live fully into the intense and terrible beauty that is human life on earth... And to live fully one must know that death is after all a gracious part of the created order... not an enemy, but a piece of the artistry of creation sprung from the mythic mind of God.... A mystery to be sure... but pay attention to the mystery... embrace the whole of it all.... And know that if there is the dark... then surely there is the light.