

## Ash Wednesday 2014

If one were to take a stroll downtown this day... one would see what *remains*... One would see scraps of paper blowing aimless along the streets... driven by a warming winter wind desperately loosing its grip... the kiosks of food venders (If you can call 'a funnel cake' food)... the kiosks now vacant... barricades askew having been jostled by revelers both at day and at night... the souls of damp and faded ribbons of Gold, purple and green, their electric spangles, yielded up into the passing night... the remains of the Gala, life's grand Gala, hoping to stake its claim against life's transience and mutability and grief... There once was the American dream, now swallowed up by insatiable capitalist greed. All things, best laid plans, our human institutions... all vanity... all return to dust and ash. So now we must make our stand in what remains... We stand amid the ashes of what has gone before... We stand in grief still for things we have lost... we stand yearning still for what was and might have been... Dreams perhaps unfulfilled... expectations driven afield by the hollow and indifferent winds of time... We stand in the reality that things have not come about as we thought they might. We stand in the reality that the grand Gala has a brief lifespan, like our own... to think otherwise is an illusion. "Humankind can't stand much reality," T.S. Eliot laments.

Today is the day in the church in which we name our solidarity together amid the ash of our existence, amid the burnt embers of life's very fire, its consuming passion... its voracious hunger for beauty and meaning, its fire for love... Today we stand among the embers and ash of loss... Loss, the base line on the musical clef of human existence, drumming an irrepressible rhythm for our parade towards ruin.

I wish that it were not so.... But it is so... In the midst of life we are in death, the Psalmist laments...

“All people are like grass,  
and all their glory is like the flowers of the field;  
the grass withers and the flowers fall,  
but the word of the Lord endures forever.”

There is an irony here... a sacred irony that we must look to the ashes of our lives to know the truth... We must, at some time or another, but surely, reckon to what remains within our hearts, those broken pieces, those fading embers of the fire of life... We must take account inevitably of the remains of the brief day we have on earth... We spend so much of our lives, our time and energy, ignoring those ashes, the base-line of our suffering... or we anesthetize them... but there will be a time brothers and sisters when we must take account of what remains.

This morning, this Ash Wednesday, as we begin our Lenten journey... I want to tell you what I believe... what I am witness to... I want to propose what you will find there:... what you will find amid the ash and dust of the remains of our brief day on earth.... You, dear ones, will find hope... not wishful thinking, but what the ancients called a sure and certain hope... Hope, God's loving and gracious gift to us from the future. Hope, an artifact from the future... It is hope that gives us courage to live yet another day... It is hope that engenders creativity and confidence... It is hope that is the source of gratitude... It is hope that casts out fear... and it is hope that will in the end redeem even the dust and ash of our world... It is hope that teaches us to love another day... another day while it lasts... and it is hope that emboldens the life of community,

the community of the faithful... that's us, and people like us.... and that in the grand scheme of things is quite enough.

Dear friends of God, take courage... Love the dust and ash within...and without... Tend to what remains... nurture it... for there is life there in the ashes...a sure and certain hope germinating there, glowing among the embers... Hope is not just an attitude but a sacred practice... Practice hope and you will find love... practice hope and you will find life.