

Ash Wednesday
Feb 22, 2023

God you hate nothing you have made.

The first sentence of the Collect today held healing power for me.

Oh God you hate nothing you have made.

I needed to be reminded of this...particularly on the day this week, when... I hated myself:
when I couldn't find an adequate way to express my compassion
when I couldn't comprehend what 46,000 dead from an earthquake might mean
when I felt overwhelmed by my powerlessness to heal even members of my own family.
when I saw my own selfishness and reluctance to trust others even as I got up in the pulpit to preach about it.
when I felt competitive with another church leader who had more support than I do
and...when i broke down in apoplectic fury...when my cat ate my sandwich.

God, you hate nothing you have made even me on a terrible, horrible, no good very bad day.

Lent is such a blessing. It's a gift to say you're sorry. To admit *some* defeats.

To have the opportunity to turn and try again. To put down a burden that you simply can't carry anymore. To acknowledge the ways you are powerless. None of us perhaps, are measuring up to the standards we have set for ourselves. Standards that seem urgent, because the problems are urgent.

All urgent:

acknowledging racism

addressing the climate emergency,

stopping Putin from devouring Ukraine without inadvertently feeding the beast of unending violence

humanitarian aid to earthquake victims:

understanding the mental health epidemic in this country

and trying to ease our children's anxieties because they are affected by the mental health epidemic, while at the same time cueing them up to take on our anxieties and sense of responsibility for the racism and planet emergencies.

It's nuts.

And yet...

I saw about me this week such goodness and longing in everyday people
Everywhere. Such a desire for the world to be a better and safer place.

I was moved for example by the words of Lutheran pastor

Nadia Bolz Weber speaking of the longing she felt watching the Ashbury Awakening happening in Kentucky

The Asbury revival or awakening is what happened after a regular chapel service at Asbury University in Kentucky two weeks ago now. The students just wouldn't go home. They just wanted to stay and sing and pray and move and be together. In hope and humility and in the spirit.

Now, I am not a revival type person. I wear my disbelief on my sleeve. I immediately wanted to know if there was a manipulator or several manipulators working for their own interests behind the scenes.

I've been at gun control rallies for example where the most passionate protesters were paid pro-gun lobbyists from out of town; people who merely pretended to be local.

So, I believe passionately in the space that ironic distance affords me to be skeptical

That the holy spirit was there however I have no doubt.

That Jesus was there I have no doubt.

And that the longing to connect was real I have no doubt. I have it myself.

And so I resonated when free-range pastor Nadia Boltz Weber wrote:

*Watching the revival on Youtube I realized that.. I long to sing with others; I long to be open-hearted; I long to be unself-conscious in my devotion to God; I long to witness something absolutely real; **I long to trust something for once.***

Yes.

And, oddly enough, that's what Ash Wednesday is for me. Something I can trust. Not a revival exactly but discovering the solidarity inherent in facing something really real. Together.

No matter how we swoop and swerve

Nip and tuck

Dodge and weave...

We are all going to die.

Our culture tells us over and over again to ignore this. It's even sort of rude to bring it up, as if death is a messy and shameful and unpopular intruder, kind of the way people used to talk about (or not talk about) menstruation when I was growing up: a shameful weakness rather than a sign of the LIFE.

A pastor friend of mine at university once cautiously invited her terminally ill registrar to come to her Ash Wednesday service. The registrar was nervous. She had cancer. The pastor was nervous. They were both afraid it would all be too much. But what is too much?

Afterwards she said through tears how meaningful the liturgy was for her:

She got to be open-hearted

She got to face something absolutely real.

And for once... instead of feeling like a social pariah, an embarrassment,

The malfunctioning part in a social machine projecting competence

she knelt in solidarity with others who were facing the same thing:

their own mortality. She wasn't alone.

I have an app. It's called We Croak. It's the Ash Wednesday of apps. It is based on a Bhutanese folk tradition that says that contemplating death 5 times a day brings happiness. It's been true for me. Here are the last three quotes from today.

The first is by beat poet Allen Ginsberg

I had a moment of clarity, saw the feeling in the heart of things, walked out to the garden crying.

The second is a dry reminder from John Dryden who wrote in the 1700's

We first make our habits. Then our habits make us. And This last from

The last is contemporary from David Hoagg: one of the teenagers who survived the atrocity of Parkland.

A life lived in fear is not a life, it's a prison.

The truth will set you free, Jesus said in the Gospel of John.

Somewhere in the future is a watered garden whose waters will never fail.

But today *remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.*

And Jesus will be with you every step of the way.

Amen.