

February 18, 2018
First Sunday in Lent

Genesis 9:8-17
Psalm 25:1-9
1 Peter 3:18-22
Mark 1:9-15

I couldn't begin writing this sermon until yesterday. My heart was too broken, my anger was too high, my frustration over the endless cycle of violence in our midst was too overwhelming. I knew I couldn't begin writing from that place of darkness. It was another school shooting, another endless list of young lives taken too soon, another set of excuses and debates and accusations. Probably like many of you, I watched the news reports, read the articles, saw the pictures and had no way of putting words together.

But there was one picture that I couldn't get out of mind. It was the picture of two women embracing one another in tears. One had the familiar mark of ashes on her forehead. She had surely just come from church for a morning Ash Wednesday service. She had marked the beginning of Lent with those words "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." And then she found herself standing out in front of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School understanding in brutal reality what those words actually meant.

I said those same words to many of you on Wednesday. As a priest, it is one of the most profound and moving things that I do. To look at each of you and remind you that life is short, to touch your forehead and watch tiny bits of ash fall down your face. To watch you receive those ashes not knowing what you may be going through in your own life. And each time I say those words reminding you of your mortality I always want to add..."but not today." I so desperately want to assure you that you will be OK. That life will be good and fair and kind to you. That disease or violence will not overtake you.

Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return...but not today.

Wednesday should not have been the day for those beautiful individuals in Parkland, Florida.

One thing is certain from my perspective as a priest, I may put ashes on each of you as adults but it is an entirely different experience to put them on a young person, on my own children or your children. We know life is not certain. We know that we are not promised tomorrow but weeks like this make me so angry that our young people have to know the reality of these ashes.

So, what is the message I am supposed to preach? As I thought about it in the context of Ash Wednesday and the beginning of the Lenten season, as I thought of that image of the mother bearing her own ashes – two things stood out.

The first was that this mother was thrown into a wilderness she never anticipated on Wednesday. She was thrown into a wilderness where the ashes came to bear. She came into a

wilderness of darkness and grief that will change her life and the lives of so many others forever.

The second thing that stood out to me was that it's a wilderness that Christ knows something about. Our Gospel reading tells us that Jesus was driven into the wilderness. After his baptism, after his commitment to his faith, after his desire to follow God, his world was turned upside down as he faced 40 days of temptation. 40 days in the valley. 40 days he did not choose.

The Lenten season brings to light these wilderness moments and in year's past, I might have approached the season with an easy resolve to reflect on ways I need to improve, or ways I need to repent; ways I could try to be closer to God. And I would take the season somewhat seriously, for a week or two. I would read my Lenten devotionals, attend a few more services, pray a little more but life in general would begin to move on. The emphasis on repentance and reflection would slowly drift away as the busyness of life took back over.

But this year, things seem a little more urgent. And, they should. We aren't faced with the symbolism of evil or the suggestion of sin. We are faced directly with the reality of the ongoing devastation of our broken world. We are in the 40 day valley and there seems to be no light at the end of the tunnel. For me, it's only made worse by the finger pointing and the accusations, and the political posturing.

Let's be honest...we have the luxury to simply be frustrated. We have the luxury of being able to turn off the TV at the end of the day because we've been lucky so far...this kind of violence hasn't touched our community. It hasn't happened in Goochland. But, what if it did? What if we found ourselves bearing ashes in the midst of such unspeakable tragedy? What would we then expect from our government, from our community, from our churches and from each other?

I have no easy answers, because there are none. But, I do know this...we have all committed to our faith, to be people of God, to live out the Gospel in our lives. And, that means something, especially in times like this. Lent is a time to reflect on our sins, to repent and return to the Lord. And folks, we need that more than ever.

Because, what is sin? Is it the act of violence? Is the act of complacency when people are hurting? Is it the act of denial when you see something that needs to be done but turn a blind eye? Is it the sin of putting worldly desires before God's desires?

I may not have easy answers but I do know one thing for certain. Evil of this magnitude as no one simple solution. It isn't just about gun control or mental health services. It isn't just about better schools or more in depth FBI investigations. It's about the ability of communities to come together to work for change – tackling the hard questions, honestly and with integrity. Recognizing that we all have a part to play in making the world safer and more secure for our children and not pointing the finger at someone else to do the work.

We are to enter the valley of Lent together, bearing one another's ashes.

So as we enter Lent, I want you to reflect on the words of the Great Litany that we started our service with this morning. Where we pray to God to redeem us and preserve us from all evil and wickedness; we pray...**Good Lord, deliver us.**

From all blindness of heart; from pride and hypocrisy; from envy, hatred, and malice; we pray...**Good Lord, deliver us.**

From all oppression; from violence, and murder; and from dying suddenly and unprepared, we pray...**Good Lord, deliver us.**

We pray that those in authority may do justice, and love mercy, and walk in the ways of truth. That we may make wars to cease, that we strive for unity and peace among all nations and freedom upon all peoples, that we work for the common good, especially the lives of children. That we support and comfort anyone in danger. Folks this is what we just prayed!

There are no easy answers. The solutions to the violence around us are not black and white. But I am certain of one thing – that is that each of us has a responsibility to make a difference. We are not passive observers in someone else's tragedy in Florida. We are their community and we are their brothers and sisters in Christ. These children may not have been our children but they are God's children.

This Lent, let us bear one another's ashes and enter the valley together so that we may come out with more hope in our future, more support for our children, more love for each other.

Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return...but not today.