



The Rev. Alan Sutherland, Rector

February 25, 2009

Ash Wednesday
By Reverend Donna Barr

I'd like to recommend a book to you called, "Girl Meets God," written by Lauren Winner, the daughter of a Reformed Jewish father and a lapsed Southern Baptist mother. Lauren takes her reader through her two conversions, (which she highly discourages for others). She first becomes an Orthodox Jew and then becomes a Christian, finding home in an Episcopal Church. "Girl Meets God" is an honest confession of faith and takes a journey with Lauren during the Church calendar year.

Tonight I'd like to share some of Laurens thoughts about Ash Wednesday..... "The imposition of ashes is nothing if not bold! The whole day is bold. There is a bold gash of ecclesiastical purple hanging on the wall of my Puritan-white simple Episcopal church. It is a bold liturgy the Book of Common Prayer suggests we acknowledge that we are dust and to dust we shall return, and to proclaim our chosen-ness as the children of God anyway. But the ashes are the boldest of all. A dark and undeniable slash across your forehead, a bold proclamation of death and resurrection all at once. You forget that it is on your forehead and you walk out of the church, out into the world, a living reminder that Christ died for us. Lauren goes on to tell her story of being a new Christian....failing her first attempt at evangelism. "I had been prepared for Ash Wednesday to be intense. I had been prepared to feel something profound or moving when the priest told me I was dust. I was not prepared for it to be a day of unavoidable evangelism." I'm not surprised that Lauren felt unprepared and uncomfortable with the bold ashes slashed across her forehead. And what are we to do with this, anyway, when our Gospel reading every year tells us, "Beware of practicing your piety before others....give your alms in secret....do not pray in the Synagogues and on the street corners like the hypocrites! But go to your room and shut the door and pray to your Father in secret.

Ash Wednesday has become a tradition with me to invite our Bishop to visit some of the people whom I have connected with over the past year. Many are Episcopalian but not connected to any

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church. I have spent many Ash Wednesday's with Bishop Wimberly going to homes of shut-in's or people who had illnesses. We would conduct a shorten version of the imposition of ashes and then followed by the Eucharist. Bishop Sauls has accepted my invitation once and I can say with bold certainty that they both have expressed their gratefulness.....that they have been blessed!

So tonight I'd like to share with you the afternoon of Ash Wednesday with Bishop Sauls. I picked him up at his office and we left for our afternoon adventure. I knew that he had participated in the Ash Wednesday service at the Cathedral at noon, but I notice that he had no ashes on his forehead. I asked him about this and he explained that he preferred to do as the Gospel instructed. We discussed the fact, that in secret, we were earnestly trying to be faithful to God. Now you say, so why are you telling this if it is a secret? I decided to talk about this Ash Wednesday tradition for this reason. For me, Ash Wednesday is not about evangelism, or whether we wear our ashes out or not. It's not about adding or taking away some spiritual dietary discipline in order to make us healthier or more worthy of salvation. It is not even really about journeying with Jesus into the wilderness. The invitation to a Holy Lent is rather about our own journey, toward intimacy with God, allowing ourselves to be drawn into the very heart of God. One way to describe my journey is a call to the diaconate, from the Greek word meaning service. To be a Deacon, one is called to follow Jesus and to live a life of obedience and service; she is also commissioned to gather others who would commit themselves; teaching them about service, sacrifice and servanthood. As the Bishop addresses the candidate for ordination to the Diaconate he proclaims that God called me to a special ministry of servanthood. I am to serve all people but especially the poor, the weak, the sick and the lonely; and to interpret the needs, the concerns and the hopes of the world to the Church. For me this means sharing ministry with my Bishop. Being drawn to God is in fact a call to return to our beginning, our essential selves, created from the dust of the earth, God's own first creation.

And so on one Ash Wednesday.....The Bishop and I visit Donald, my friend for some 20 years. An

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automobile accident in his early 20's left him paraplegic and neurologically impaired. He is wheelchair bound, and has no family. We meet him at the YMCA where he rides his motorized chair and where he has a community with the employees and people who come to the Y. He swims for exercise and then just hangs out all day where he has contact with the world until the Y closes. We find a space in a large lobby in which to talk. In his slurred speech Donald holds the Bishop's hand and asks him about his ring. They talk....I have to interpret sometimes because it is hard to understand. What is clear in the conversation, however, is the deep connection of fellowship.....one Episcopalian to another.....a love for their church and rich heritage and a faithful hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. Then...The imposition of ashes..... "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Then...The Holy Eucharist..... "The body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Keep you in everlasting life." We get up to leave and Donald says he wishes we could stay. We are silent as we walk out into the cold February Day. Tears fall from both our faces.

Sally opens the door, holding an 8 x 10 glossy of her Father when he was Bishop of Puerto Rico. She is dressed for church, has had her hair fixed, and her smile could light up a room. She has invited two of her five children to join us. Sally is 95 years old. Her daughter joining us is 75 and her son is 60. The room is filled with Sally's and her youngest daughter's paintings. Beautiful watercolor landscapes, many painted at Sewanee and other parts of the world. Telling stories about her father....at Sewanee....then in Puerto Rico. Tales of sailing with her father from island to island for confirmations, baptisms, or funerals. Sally's caregiver, Teresa, stands back in the kitchen as we visit. Bishop Sauls invites her to join us for the sacraments. Then...The imposition of ashes..... "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Then....The Holy Eucharist..... "The body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Keep you in everlasting life. We get up to leave and Sally say's she wishes we didn't have to leave.

Bishop Sauls and I share our thoughts about our day. We talk about how tired we are.....a

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grateful and blessed and good tired. A place of stillness and silence. This surely must be the call to return to our beginning, our essential selves, and drawn into the love of God.

There are other people on my heart tonight.... God has connected to me in recent years and months and days..... Mary.....Clara..... Lindsay....Bobby.....Virgil....and Jim.

There are so many others.They all have their stories and they all want to know if I can stay. The first time I visited Sally she was apologetic about not being able to get to church anymore. She said it was just so hard to get ready in the mornings and she couldn't drive anyway.....my remark to her lament was, "Well, Sally, we'll just have to bring the church to you."

So my friends, be bold and practice a Holy Lent....go to your rooms and pray to your Father in secret. Be bold and pray for each other in the church and then be bold and go out into the world, being drawn to the love of God and return to your beginning; your essential self, and then remembering we are dust, and to dust we shall return.

Amen

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