

“Church People Need Ashes”

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For an Ash Wednesday Service at St. John the Evangelist Anglican Church, Elora

James 4.1-10

February 10, 2016

What causes fights and quarrels among you?

Don't they come from your passions that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your passions.

You adulterous people! Don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us?

But he gives more grace! That is why Scripture says: “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.”

So submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

James 4.1-10

Adapted from the New International Version

I guess I should say “thank you” for this time to worship with you, and to break open God’s Word for us this evening. Truly, I am grateful.

But, it is Ash Wednesday.

Listen again from the first reading, from the Epistle of James: . . . *you sinners . . . you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Laughter, make into mourning. Joy, into gloom.*

I think the correct theological term is, “ugghhh.”

Yet Ash Wednesday is good news. For today, we hear the seed which God plants, the seed of our exaltation.

II

Anne Rice has made her mark writing novels about vampires. About 10 years ago, she wrote her first about Jesus, *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt*. (She's since written a second.) These were delightful, daring, thoughtful, well researched, and infused with her deep love for our Lord. She had returned, you see, to the church of her upbringing.

But, as is often the case, the community of Christ's disciples proved disappointing. Some time after, she posted this:

Today I quit being a Christian. I'm out. I remain committed to Christ as always but not to being "Christian" or to being part of Christianity. It's simply impossible for me to "belong" to this quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, and deservedly infamous group. For ten years, I've tried. I've failed. I'm an outsider. My conscious will allow nothing else.¹

Quarrelsome.

Hostile.

Disputatious.

Deservedly infamous.

I think she's figured us out!

That's why we of all people — church people many of us, pastors and priests among us — need Ash Wednesday.

III

I'd really like to say that the problem lies "out there." I'd like to say it's you. Or better, "them." And the further away from me I can locate "them," the better. Because then we better-thinking-folks, us purer-motivated-people, can clutch together, secure in our own goodness.

But the Holy Spirit, speaking through James the brother of our Lord, will not let us get away with that.

The cause, the source, the root of these clashes we have — clashes we have, not with those "out there" but our sisters and brothers within the Body of Christ — is me. I'd prefer to say just "you," or "them." But it's me.

What I grasp after things, when I want whatever others have or can give me . . . these passions ferment and boil in my soul. And when I twist myself to get them, or worse, when I don't get them, these passions burst in rage. Sure, I'm good at hiding it all. Yet there is homicide going on in my heart. Which causes clashes and wars within the Body of Christ.

¹ Quoted by Scot McKnight in his "Jesus Creed" blog, on July 30, 2010; www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2010/07/30/anne-rice-quits

IV

Now, we can all come up with things we crave and chase that are not good. It's even more dangerous when what we desire is good.

James calls us adulterers. Harsh. He's following a long scriptural tradition, though, wherein God's relationship with God's people is cast in the most intimate terms: Lover and beloved, Husband and wife, marriage. And when this most intimate relationship is betrayed, the cost is calamitous.

God has crafted us with spirits to be the beloved, and whatever threatens that, our divine design as lovers of God, provokes God's holy and good jealousy. God will protect that relationship!

Again, when it is something rotten that teases us away, it is bad enough. But when it is something good that becomes our first love, so much more is our self-deception.

Why do we quarrel? We'd like to say it's because we stand for justice . . . and they don't. Or, we're for faithfulness . . . and they aren't. We're for whatever it is that is "good" . . . and they obviously do not care as much as we do.

By all means, so many things we strive for are good, very good. But they are not our first love. Or must not be.

When they become what we are all about — and they so easily do because they are good — then we are no longer being shaped by our love for God and God's love for us. Instead, other ways, other priorities, other patterns of thought and behaviour — the "world" as James calls them — take hold and twist them. Our pride at us being right, and those others being wrong, takes hold. And such loves, even good loves, cannot cohabit with love for God, Who is our greatest love.

V

But this happens, so easily. More easily, perhaps, to us "good church folk."

I've heard that if you're having trouble with forgiving others, then immerse yourself in a congregation. For in such a community you will have no shortage of opportunity to practice forgiving.

And once you start getting over yourself, you might begin learning to receive forgiveness from others. For you will give them plenty of reason.

And somewhere along the road we'll be travelling together with this Stranger named Jesus, perhaps when he breaks bread, and says with tears and kindness that he is broken for you, you will find yourself on your knees with the rest of us sinners, given to grieving, mourning, and wailing, stripped of laughter, bereft of joy, in ashes.

And what a gift that will be.

The gift of realizing a bit of who you are, and the bad company you are keeping with us, and how well you fit in.

And the gift of realizing a bit of how hopeless this is, this community called church.

The greatest gift: apprehending a glimpse, that God gives more grace. By God's grace will you be lifted up, forgiven, healed, restored, and exalted.

Within the ashes, is planted that seed. Praise be to God. Amen.