

Karma vs. Grace

March 1, 2017

A friend of mine told me about an assignment that she had in a class when she was working on her PhD in creative writing. The assignment was to write something that was happy, but not sappy. Happy, but not sappy. She chewed on this all semester long trying to figure out what the difference is, what the nuance there would be. And she determined that something that's happy, but not sappy is something in which you can still see or hear a little bit of the hurt. There's that reality that shines through with the joy.

That's one of the reasons that I love Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday is a day in which we say, "I can be different" while we're also saying, "I need to be different." Lent reminds us that we're all in the same boat, the sinking ship of our failed attempts to save ourselves, to love ourselves, to save those we love. The ashes are not a mere symbol. They're not a public sign of our piety like our Gospel tells us not to do. They are as real as it gets. They're a sticky, and grimy, and gritty smear. We plaster them on our foreheads precisely in the same spot where we pour the waters of baptism. The ashes go in the same place where we put the water.

For Christians, this juxtaposition is as liberating as it is instructive. In baptism, we pour that water and say, "You are my beloved with whom I am well pleased." And today with ashes we say, "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return."

As good American Protestants, we've bastardized this season. In Lent, we take on a project and say, "Yes, we can. Si, se puede." The Americanization of this season we've turned into self mastery. If I can be disciplined enough, I can do it. I will be different. A Lent focused on one's sin and depravity, one focused on self denial, misses the mark. What we're invited to in this season of behaving differently is relying on God, making room for God, so as to allow God in to our cracks to heal and to soothe.

When I've taught ancient prayer practices to teenagers before, I've describe the anointing that we'll do later on tonight as divine hand lotion. It's letting God get in and sealing in that goodness from our baptism. And whether your baptism was 80 years ago or – we had a little baby just three days ago be baptized – no matter how long ago or how recently that was, we can still seal in that water of goodness.

Lent is not about punishing ourselves for our past transgressions nor is it about self mastery and control exhibited by getting to the end of the 40 days without cheating on our Lenten practices. Those things don't serve God. God wants changed lives, not changed waistlines and TV watching habits.

So if we have turned Lent into "Si, se puede" and "Yes, we can," the ancient practice of Lent was, "No, you can't. You're dust. You're going to be dust. You alone can't, but with God you can."

Ash Wednesday could be renamed the Feast of the Second Step – admitting that a higher power is in control and can return us to sanity. Ash Wednesday, when observed correctly, serves as a corrective to the profoundly mistaken idea that at the heart of the Christian Gospel is the doctrine of karma rather than grace. Karma says that what goes around comes around. If you do X, Y, or

Z; X, Y, or Z will come back to you. Grace says that despite doing X, Y, or Z, despite straying in sin, God loves you deeply and profoundly and is not just willing to take you back, but is actively seeking renewed relationship with you. Grace is the hound of heaven seeking us out, hunting us down, refusing to give up on us. Grace is coming to understand that God first loved us and that is our motivation for a changed life and not the other way around.

Therefore, Lent is a time for us to spend a little extra time with this pursuing God. It's a time for us to set aside some time, set aside some of the crutches, the coping mechanisms, the buffers, to make some room and let God's healing grace in.

That's a tall order, isn't it?

Wouldn't you rather wear ashes on your forehead than have someone ask why your mascara is smeared and your eyeliner is running? Why there was that catch in your voice when you answered the phone? God says come to me with weeping and mourning. Come to me when you are broken. Come to me with your heart breaking, and cold, and fragile, and spent. Come to me from that numb place that doesn't even know if it's lovable and I will show you. "Rend your hearts and not your garments," the prophet Joel says. Rip open your heart and let God do with it what God will because your heart of stone is not serving either of you.

Seen this way, Lent reminds us of whose we are. The sacrifices, the disciplines – these are not intended as good works offered by us to God; rather, they are God's gifts to us to remind us who we are and to whom we belong. We are God's adopted daughters and sons, God's treasure so priceless that God was willing to go to every length possible to tell us that we are loved, that we have value, that we have purpose.

Four years ago, I was going through a very messy, very ugly breakup. In years past I had taken on various spiritual disciplines for Lent, going vegetarian and giving the money that I saved to the soup kitchen, or fasting from dating and credit cards. All of these were efforts at simplicity and making room in my life for the things that I really valued and that really mattered: God, faith, God's people.

That year, though, things were really tough. I was already spent. I'd always had a rule not to buy flowers during Lent. Living here in this northern climate, it's always so tempting to me at the grocery store the moment the tulips and the daffodils and the irises hit the shelves. But I would refrain from buying them. I always made myself wait until Easter, deferring that simple joy until the day of ultimate joy.

Like I said, though, four years ago I felt like I'd been living an eight-month Lent, like deprivation and harshness had been my constant shadow. So instead of fasting from flowers, I made a commitment to buy some every week as a sign to myself to keep beauty, and hope, and promise in front of my face. What's more, I made it a point to buy some for someone else every week as well. Nothing fancy – I didn't break the bank – but a bunch of tulips or a hyacinth for the people in the office, or someone that I was visiting in the hospital, or a neighbor, or a friend I was seeing after work. I made that tiny attempt of spreading beauty, spreading love.

Lent is meant to help us to find our way back to God. As we read in the prophet Joel, "Come back to me, with all your heart."

The black sooty cross that we wear on Ash Wednesday is ultimately a sign of love. For it is love alone that conquers death. Among the rubble and ruin of Wednesday's ashes is a black organic substance that marks us as God's own, God's beloved. It's a prescription, a blessing. God said, "I made infinite joy out of that device of torture. I made the whole human race out of dirt and breath. Tonight, let me go to work because there is something extraordinary that I can do in your life, too."

My prayer this year is that this season will be a long, drawn out AMEN in each of our lives, that we will spend this time offering to God, pleading with God. Make it so. Amen.

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