

A PARABLE OF ASHES

Psalm 51

[Ash Wednesday, 9 March 2011, Augsburg College Chapel]

It was shortly after lunch when our plane landed in Ho Chi Minh City – what we know as Saigon, Vietnam – it was a clear and not too terribly warm day...and as our plane taxied to the terminal, we had our first glimpse of the ashes...along the runway were rusted gunnery positions and burned out hangars, remnants of a time we might wish to forget...the ashes of nationalistic pride and war and violence and suffering.

As we pushed our way out of the airport, and climbed into vans to begin our trip into the city, the teeming masses of people crowding the sidewalks and streets were a blur of activity, but there was another glimpse of ashes...the soot and dust hung in the air, those who cared and knew better wore masks, others were oblivious to the palpable signs of human progress and of their own disease...fossil fuel, spewed into the air, obscured our views...the ashes of greed and progress and pollution and sickness.

That evening as we walked from dinner near our hotel, we had our first encounters with the poor who looked to us for hand-outs, crisp dollar bills were the ticket – for some, nearly a month's wage – but their pleas did not hide their circumstances, open fires on the city sidewalks, preparing the little food they could gather, the smells and sights of making do, getting by, surviving if they could...the ashes of poverty and injustice and hunger...

The next morning we were up very early, on our way out of the city by 3 am, and the fires blazed on street corners and alongside the road as we drove south toward the Mekong River...open fires to battle the darkness, to offer security, to mark a place – a country awake while we dozed in our comfortable vans, a country fighting to keep the lights shining, to hold off the darkness...the ashes of the night and the frightening and the unexpected...

And six hours later as we pulled into the hidden driveway and parked near the public entrance to the orphanage, we were face to face with the children who had been left behind, children of all ages whose parents were too poor or too sick or too tired to care for them properly – this was our destination – and after a few minutes of governmental formalities, five screaming children appeared from behind a closed door...the ashes of love that did not survive the realities of life, the ashes of our souls...

And then we saw his face – the face we had seen before only in a few sketchy photographs – and he screamed for all of his life as he clung to his new mother's neck – and we cried and laughed and kissed him and comforted him...and told him how much we loved him...and a few days later when he awoke in our bed, back in the city, and laughed at my funny face and let me hold him tight, I knew that the ashes would never overcome the love we know in the embrace of a child...the ashes are the inevitable and messy stuff of our lives, they are always there with

their smells and stains and reminders of darkness and sin, but they will never win as long as we believe that God loves us and sends us children to share our lives...

And now we're home and some of the wonder of those days in Vietnam has faded, but once in a while even yet, I am in the basement room where we have several souvenirs from our visit to Vietnam and the smell of the ashes from the baskets and nets still brings me up short, gets under my skin, reminds me of who I am, who I truly am...and then I walk into Thomas's room to find him playing and smiling. Hi Dad, he says, and I know the love that God intends for God's people.

God had a son whose life, death, resurrection, and ascension from the ashes promises us that we shall never be separated from the love of God – a Son whose name and sacrifice we recall today as we are marked with the cross of ashes, the ashes of our own mortality – from dust you have come and to dust you shall return – marked so that we might celebrate the wondrous joy of God's deep and abiding love, God's Easter love.

This is my parable of ashes for this Ash Wednesday, a personal story that reminds me of the ashes that mark our existence on this earth, our ashes of pride and war, of greed and progress, of poverty and injustice, of the darkness and unexpected, of the loves that did not survive – this is who we are, whether we live in Vietnam or Minneapolis. But who we are has been transformed by the love of God, the love we know in our communities of faith, in our bonds of love, in the embrace of our children...the love we know in the cross of our Savior, who creates in us a clean heart, a new and right spirit. Thanks be to God who loves us so much that he sent his only Son to save us from our ashes. Amen.