

CREATE IN ME

Psalm 51: 1-12

[Ash Wednesday, 13 February 2013, Augsburg College Chapel]

Eleven years ago, I preached an Ash Wednesday sermon that recounted the trip to Vietnam that Abigail and I took to find and adopt our son, Thomas. It has become an anthem of sorts for our family. We had just returned from Vietnam and I was struck by the many ways in which “ashes” were part of our experience there – both symbolic ashes of war and poverty and injustice, and the very real ashes of fires burning on sidewalks and in the countryside for cooking and manufacturing and fighting off the darkness.

That Ash Wednesday homily included these words:

And now we're home and some of the wonder of those days in Vietnam has faded, but once in a while 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 ready to get up from his nap, and he smiles and reaches for me, and I know the love that God intends for his 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.

I still remember that first trip to Vietnam vividly – it was full of both ashes and promise, as we expanded our family to include Thomas. Many of you know that in December, Abigail, Thomas, Maya and I returned to Vietnam to help Thomas understand more about his home country, to visit the part of Vietnam where he was born, and most significantly, to meet his birth mother and grandmother. It was a remarkable trip in so many ways – here are a few pictures of what we experienced in this beautiful country half a world away.

But as I think back on our time in Vietnam, perhaps the real gift we received was coming to see how, over the past eleven years, we have come full circle out of the ashes to learn that hearts can be created new, that there is genuine joy in our salvation, that our mortality can be reconciled to God's loving intentions for us. See the joy in those faces!

And on this Ash Wednesday, eleven years later, I stand before you to humbly proclaim that the ashes of our lives, the ashes we are marked with this morning, have been redeemed by God's awesome Easter love. And here we live, as those marked by the ashes of the world, our iniquities, the power of darkness, and at the same time, those

reconciled to God's good creation, to each other and to our astonishing God, who loves us so much.

My favorite poet, Wendell Berry, says it clearly in his "Original Sin":

*Well, anyhow, it preserves us from the pride
of thinking that we invented sin ourselves
by our originality, that famous modern power.
In fact, we have it from the beginning
of the world by the errors of being born
being young, being old, causing pain
to ourselves, to others, to the world, to God
by ignorance, by knowledge, by intention,
by accident. Something is bad the matter
here, informing us of itself, handing down
its old instruction. We know it
when we see it, don't we? Innocence
would never recognize it. We need it
too, for without it we would not know
forgiveness, goodness, gratitude,
that fund of grace by which alone we live.*

And there you have it. Out of the ashes – out of our mortality and iniquity, our injustice and violence, our indifference and pain – we know the wonder of God's remarkable promise – the promise of reconciliation and peace and compassion and love; of forgiveness and goodness and gratitude and grace.

I know this because I've seen it first hand in the gift of my son – born in the midst of ashes and now reconciled to a world of love that surpasses all human understanding. Look at the joy in those faces!

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.