

Separated

Isaiah 58: 11-12

Psalm 51: 8-17

[Ash Wednesday, 22 February 2012, Augsburg College Chapel]

“Create in me a clean heart, O God.”

When I served a small Lutheran church in Indiana, I was always moved by the ritual of parishioners coming to the altar to kneel and have the ashes imposed on their foreheads in the sign of the cross, as I said to them, “Remember, that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” And shortly thereafter gathering together for the Lord’s Supper, and hearing the remarkable promise: “This is my body given for you, my blood shed for you.” This morning, my thoughts are with one of their company, whose illness became a metaphor for my reflections on Ash Wednesday. Allow me to tell you about my friend, Marie.

Marie is a lifelong member of First Lutheran Church (a cradle to grave Lutheran), baptized, confirmed, married, buried a husband, a faithful participant in worship and hospitality, the one entrusted with church collections and record-keeping, a wise, cheerful presence for almost 90 years of life.

Late one summer, Marie – who often reminded me as less senior members of the congregation were taken ill and, in a couple instances, died, that she had never been sick a day in her life – did something to her back that just wouldn’t go away. She struggled with it for a while, made a few trips to a chiropractor, but finally could not stand the pain any longer, and started on a track of medical treatment that was not out of the ordinary (especially for someone her age) but which had a huge impact on her life and outlook – suffice to say, she did not take it very well – drugs, walkers, lots of x-rays and cat scans, finally surgery – the end result was that Marie had been separated from the people and things and values that were her bearings in life.

Separated from her body – it had failed her, walker is a nuisance, blames herself for a life where she did not pay attention to her body.

Separated from her history – lives in a wonderful house that she and her late husband built from scratch on the Wabash River – but now she thinks about how all the lifting she did back then probably contributed to her illness.

Separated from her community – can’t get to church, can’t drive herself anywhere, which isn’t so bad, except that her euchre partners relied on her to get them to senior center, now they can’t go – a poignant part of life.

Separated from her calling – even late in her life, Marie was a partner in various relationships, she kept the church books and she has given that up.

“You shall be called the repairer of the breach...”

I remember a promo for a new television show about a young mother who becomes a social activist that proclaimed, “The world is not perfect, so fix it!,” which of course is what many of us faced with the Maries of our own lives seek to do – fix the separation, say the words, prescribe the solution, read the scripture...

But of course, I can’t fix it (as Lutherans, we all know that somewhere deep inside), so Marie and I would sit at her kitchen table and share the Eucharist, the bread and wine, body and blood – right next to the cookies she always wanted to give me – and as I looked into her eyes while sharing the sacrament, I knew that nothing can separate us, nothing can keep us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus.

And there we are, all of us, in this awkward, painful tension between the separations we all know: from each other, ourselves, our communities of memory and meaning and faith, from the things and people that matter – and the separation that is not possible for those who believe - nothing can separate us, nothing, I believe

What a mess – T.S. Eliot sums it up pretty well in his 1930 poem, “Ash Wednesday”

*“This is the time of tension between dying and birth,
The place of solitude where three dreams cross Between blue rocks...
Blessed sister, holy mother, spirit of the mountain, spirit of the garden,
Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood,
Teach us to care and not to care,
Teach us to sit still Even among these rocks,
Our peace is in His will And even among these rocks,
Sister, mother, and spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,
Suffer me not to be separated.
And let my cry come unto thee.”*

Let my cry come unto Thee – I believe, Lord, help my unbelief

Ashes are a mess, just like life in the mean time – what better reminder could we want as we enter Lent – there are so many illnesses and diseases and pathologies and injustices that separate us from all that we care about and love, but we believe that the separations of our lives have been redeemed by our God who loves us so much that he sent his only Son to save us, to conquer our illnesses, to shower us with abundant and steadfast grace.

So here, as we are marked with the ashes and gather at our Lord’s table, may we find the strength and wisdom to debark on our Lenten journeys, to live with our separations, believing in the joyous Easter promise of an eternal Eucharist – nothing can separate us from that love - and perhaps Marie will be there, reconciled and healed, offering us some of her cookies!

“Do not cast me away from your presence...Restore to me the joy of your salvation.” Let my cry come unto Thee. Amen.