

## Ash Wednesday Meditation

### The Cleansing Of The Heart

Psalm 24: 3-4a, Psalm 51: 1-2, 10,11, Matthew 5:8 .

I want us to address matters of the heart tonight— and the cleansing of the heart. In the Hebrew way of thinking there was the mind, there was the will, but the deepest part of us was the heart . C.G. Jung, one the founders of psycho-analysis, wrote :

“The utterances of the heart — unlike those of the discriminating intellect — always relate to the whole.”

We know this to be true. “I left my heart in San Francisco”. We leave them all over the place. Dying of a broken heart is more than a figure of speech. St. Francis prayed, “Give me a transformed and undefended heart.” I think our truest confessions are the words of the undefended heart. Sometimes our hearts can grow hard. Pema Chodron tells the story of when she was 6 years old walking alone feeling unloved, lonely and mad kicking sticks , stones, anything she could find . An old woman watching her laughed and said “Little girl, don’t you go letting life harden your heart !” We pray for the softening of our hearts, hearts made pliable with love. Augustine prayed, “Our heart is restless until it rests in You.” Our hearts are fickle, fleeting, fugitive. What can save our hearts?

The Bible is replete with references to the heart as the core of who we are. So the condition of the heart is crucial to the condition of our spirituality.

## I

In Psalm 24 we read:

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord,  
And who shall stand in God's holy place?

And the answer:

The one who has clean hands and a pure heart.

Imagine ancient pilgrims to Jerusalem climbing up the steep hill to Jerusalem and to the temple , singing this psalm . They are seeking the cleansing of their hands and hearts as they make their way up God's holy hill to God's holy place. So we too seek this cleansing as we walk toward the hill of the Cross where Jesus was slain by and for our human sins. It is right, then, that we hear the prayer of Psalm 51 as we enter Lent this Ash Wednesday evening. It is for the church around the world the preeminent Psalm of Lent.

Have mercy on me, O God ,  
according to your steadfast love;  
by your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.

Wash me “thoroughly”, through and through, from my guilt

and cleanse me from my sin....

Create in me a clean heart, O God ,

and put a new and right spirit within me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation

and uphold me with a willing spirit.

In other words , move us from human willfulness to a deep willingness before God.

## II

We enter this season knowing that we cannot fully cleanse our own hearts. We need God for that. We cannot fully forgive ourselves, though we try and try. We need God’s help in this.

Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure in heart , for they shall see God .”( Matthew 5:8)

What can it mean to have a pure heart? Soren Kierkegaard wrote, “Purity of heart is willing one thing”. Our hearts set in one direction. We often live with a kind of double-mindedness. Wanting this AND this! Wanting God, but wanting other things at the same time . A pure heart is an unmixed heart, wanting one thing

above the others. And for these days of Lent, it is wanting the cleansing of the heart that we might see God truly.

### III

Tonight we receive the anointing of ashes. They are a mark of our need of God. They are a mark of our finiteness and frailty. We are dust. Without the breath, Spirit, of God, we are only dust. In the second Creation story God scoops is out of the clay, forms us of the soil and breathes into us God's own breath . When this happens, the text says , we became and we become "living souls ". We are mud and spark. On Ash Wednesday we are reminded of the mudness of us and our need of the Spirit of God.

In this we find our real, honest to God humility. The word humility is taken from the word " humus". Soil. Humility is the recognition of the limits of our human power, wisdom and goodness. God is God and we are not .

St. Anne Lamott writes that if we are to practice the presence of God, it would help to admit the three basic truths of our existence: "that we are so ruined and so loved and in charge of so little."

So, when you come to receive the ashes on your forehead in the shape of the cross, you will hear these words : "You are dust , and you are God's beloved. Live in the knowledge of both truths. Come now and receive your anointing of ashes.

Amen