

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

12 Cor. 5:2b-6:10

“O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth
shall proclaim your praise.” AMEN!

(Sing!)

“Cruel, cruel world, must I go on?
Cruel, cruel world, I’m moving on

I’ve been living too fast
And I’ve been living too wrong

Cruel, cruel world. I’m gone”

This chorus is from the great Willie Nelson
and the song is, “Cruel World.”

The song’s lyrics reflect leaving behind
a life that was not ethical nor moral and

And he urges himself to strive
for a better existence, one that is
responsible and life-giving.

For me, that is a lot like tonight.

On this Ash Wednesday, on the most
solemn of liturgical days after Good Friday,
we may also find a call to “move on.”

To move on from a life
that's been lived
“too fast and a life
lived too wrong.”

Tonight is not only about recognizing the failures,
but turning from them and
then, be sanctified, to move on. (Pause)

In the reading from the prophet Joel
we find a people set in a land of
darkness and gloom.

It's judgment language that warns
people of the imminent “day of the Lord.”

Then the Prophet, calls people together and
bids them to turn back to God,
so that God “might” intervene and stop

the horrible locust plague that was
devouring the people's food sources.

Land and food supplies were being decimated and
the prophet knew God has the power to end it,
but the prophet also knew that
it's not up to him nor anyone else,

it's up to the people to return, yes,

to return, gather, and sanctify...
but it's essentially God's decision.

And that, I believe is at the heart of
the gospel's message tonight about motivation.

In case any of us are thinking this is
purely a behavioral "good action," be warned.

This is not a message about having other
people admire you or me.

This is not about being having human approval, at all.

Although the good works may
be noticed by other people.

Tonight is the familiar urge to live
a better existence that is responsible
and life-giving.(Pause)

In the familiar Ash Wednesday
lesson from Matthew,
we have a text criticism.

The word "piety" is better
translated to "righteousness."

As in, "blessed are those who hunger and

thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.”

Where “piety” is defined as the
way a person worships,

“righteousness” (in Matthew) means
justice and fairness.

Matthew wrote that our good actions are
to be focused on God alone; and
to let them only be known by God.

And we hold that inward repentance tension
with the outward revelation that God is at work
in and around us while knowing that in

the end it will be God’s decision
to do or not do. (Pause)

It is the great, “Who knows?”

The prophet Joel will testify to
God’s unrelenting mercy, but then say,

“Who knows?”

“Who knows whether God will not turn and relent?”

That question is asked in other places, too.

When David and Bathsheba's child
dies in infancy, David said,

“While the child was alive I fasted and wept,
for I said, “Who knows?””

The Lord may be gracious to me, and
the child may live.”

In Jonah, the king of Ninevah proclaimed
after the people repented, “Who knows?”

God may relent and change God's mind;
God may turn from the fierce anger, so that
we may not perish.”

“Who knows?” (Pause)

So, too, we may wonder at each Ash Wednesday,
if this will be the last cross smeared
on our foreheads.

And the wondering should NOT
be considered a morbid thought, not if it
spurs us to live each day as if it is the last.

Nor shall we take on a fatalistic notion

to pray, believe, and strive for repentance
because “who knows?”

There are plenty of places where precedent is set.

After all, mercy is not only a
New Testament gift from God.

God’s mercy has revealed itself in
the Old and the New Testaments.

Mercy is an ongoing feature of
God’s nature throughout Scripture. (Pause)

Yes, this is a cruel world AND it is
a beautiful and loving world where miracles occur
every single day.

Guarantees are hard to come by in this world,
just as they are when it comes to relationships. (Pause)

The ashes used tonight are from
a collection of ashes made from palms
used in previous Palm Sunday services.

You know, those palms we wave
while processing into the church from
the outside to remember Jesus’ welcome
into Jerusalem.

We know what welcome meant.

We know what's coming, yet
we shout defiantly,

“Hosanna, blessed is the One
who comes in the name of the Lord!”

And sing defiantly, “All glory, laud, and honor!”

It is a paradox of faith!

Elation to grief, then
grief to elation.

Remember, we are dust and to dust we shall return.

I believe this was what Joel and Jesus
were talking about.

Everything, all the rituals and traditions,
all the chanting and music,
all the prayers and sermons,
the laughter and the tears...

none of it will save us if there is
no relationship building in, under, and
through them.

Material things will rust and decay,
obstacles will be broken down, and
all the afflictions Paul listed in

the Corinthian text will be met with
the weapons of righteousness...

by knowledge, patience, kindness,
holiness of spirit, genuine love,
truthful speech, and the power of God.

Justice and fairness are treasures
stored up in heaven, these are where our
hearts are to be focused and set,

so that relationships will bloom from the ashes.

AMEN!