

Sermon for Ash Wednesday, February 14, 2018 - "Rituals for the World"

Ash Wednesday
February 14, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

How many times a day do you have this kind of exchange: "How are you?" "Good. You?" "Good."

This is just a common exchange; we say it all the time, no big deal. Except it doesn't always feel honest. Things are not so good. Our lives and our world are not as they should be. They are marred by personal and systemic sinfulness, injustice, violence, sorrow.

Ash Wednesday brings us face to face with all of that. The ashen cross marked on our foreheads reminds us, and everyone who sees us, that things are not fine. The ashen cross reminds us to stop and reflect on that question, "how are you?", and wrestle with the answer.

This is an uncomfortable thing to do in a culture that is so focused on staying positive and looking on the bright side, in a culture that tells us to just keep busy - to keep doing, working, spending, just keep going. We don't have many opportunities to reflect and to be honest.

Yet, if you've traveled outside the US you may have noticed that Americans aren't the only ones who answer that "how are you?" question with a stock answer. I've been thinking a lot about time I spent in Tanzania since John Moeller returned from his recent trip.

When someone there asks you, "habari za leo?"- "how is the day?", the only appropriate response is, "nzuri"- "good". It's also the only appropriate response when you are asked a multitude of other questions. People stop and ask about every aspect of your life: how is the work, how is school, how are the children, how is the family?, and you're supposed to just keep repeating, "nzuri na we?"- "good and you?". I kept thinking, couldn't we be a little more reflective, a little more honest? For instance, one day our Tanzanian friend was driving us into the city when he saw two of his friends walking along the road. He stopped to offer them a ride. As they got in we asked each other all the questions, including, "how was your trip?"- "good". Then, after fifteen minutes of these exchanges, they shared that their suitcase had been stolen on the trip.

I was blown away. If my suitcase was stolen and a friend asked about my trip, I would not have been able to say it was good. I would not have been able to wait for fifteen minutes before sharing the hard news. I would have led with, "oh, you won't believe what happened!"

Slowly I came to see the power in this way of greeting. Tanzanians don't just vent about their problems with whomever they happen to see. They don't just rush past each other. There are ritualized ways to stop, turn towards one another, and show concern about every aspect of life. Once the connection with another person is established, then they reflect more openly on what's happening in their lives. They stay in the conversation much longer than we do and can move past the "fine, good", or the venting into more

depth. There's also space for expressing what is not so good in communal rituals that provide space and time for weeping, fervent prayer and even loud wailing as people repent, grieve and lament.

All of these ritualized greetings and practices shape the people of Tanzania to tend to the wellbeing of others and the whole community. It isn't surprising that the Tanzanian church is so strong and vibrant, as so many of the cultural practices fit what we need in our lives of faith.

We all need opportunities to stop, to turn toward one another and toward God. We need practices that allow us to acknowledge, together, that things are not as they should be, as well as practices that help us to experience healing and wellbeing.

We are given these opportunities on Ash Wednesday, throughout the season of Lent, and each time we gather for worship. We share in rituals like confession and forgiveness, the imposition of ashes, the laying on of hands, remembrance of baptism and Holy Communion. We share in ritualized conversations between worshippers and worship leaders that invite us into deeper conversation with scripture and with God.

As we share in these practices, we tend to our own personal wellbeing. Yet they are not for us alone. These practices also shape us to tend to the needs of others. The rituals that we share, in community and as a community, have far-reaching implications. They shape us in a particular way of being that serves a hurting world.

When we look at our world these days it's easy to just vent or succumb to despair. It's easy to blame everyone else and to try to fix the world according to our own opinions. It's tempting to try to ignore it all, put on a happy face and focus on our own security. But those are not God's ways; those things do not serve the world that God so loves.

Rituals for repentance, confession and forgiveness help us to see that the brokenness is within us as well as around us. We come face to face with the ways our actions influence others. We're confronted with the truth that we cannot fix this world on our own. We learn to be honest and to lament. We're also opened to experience God's steadfast love and mercy which never fails. We learn to praise even when we feel discouraged, for praise helps us to defy the power of sin and suffering to define us. We're drawn into deeper, honest conversations with God that heal us. In all these ways, we are shaped to be people who can stand in the broken places of our world as vessels of mercy and healing for others.

Things are not as they should be, but we need not despair. God is good, God forgives, God heals. God shapes us into people who can tend to our world in life-giving ways.

So, perhaps we can honestly answer that "how are you" question with the word "good" because God is good and God helps us to be people who both lament and praise.

Thanks be to God.

