

Sermon for Ash Wednesday, March 6, 2019

Solemn Mass

By the Reverend James Ross Smith

Isaiah 58:1–12; Psalm 103:8–14; 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10; Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21

In her autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, Helen Keller recalls the day in March 1887, when her teacher, Annie Sullivan, came to her home in Tuscumbia, Alabama. Helen Keller was seven years old. She'd been deaf, blind, and mute for some five and a half years. In her autobiography, Keller called the day Sullivan arrived her “soul’s birthday,” because on that day Sullivan set out to give her young charge the gift of language. It took some time. Helen had not yet made the essential connection between word and object, or word and action. But Sullivan kept at it, finger-spelling repeatedly on the palm of Helen’s hand. One day, the link was forged. Sullivan ran cool water over one of Helen’s hands while spelling *w-a-t-e-r* on the palm of the other. Suddenly, Helen understood. She describes the moment in her autobiography, “I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of [my teacher’s] fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten — a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that *w-a-t-e-r* meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. The living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, set it free!”¹

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller

Helen Keller tells us three things here: first, language is an essential part of human life and flourishing. Second, language is a *powerful* thing, not to be taken for granted. Words are not “just words.” They can do things, and they can change things. Third, to be human is to be in relationship: Annie Sullivan knocks on the door, and, after a time, Helen is reborn.

On Ash Wednesday, the Church invites us to listen to the words of the prophet Isaiah, the apostle Paul, and Jesus Christ, our Redeemer. These are our teachers today, and their words are powerful. Each voice is unique, each is urgent, because all these teachers want to help us. They address us in order to diagnose our illnesses, to exhort us to change our lives, to urge us to see God’s loving-kindness for what it is, and to trust that we really are able, however haltingly, to pray from the heart without relying on grand gestures or dramatic displays. Each reading insists, “You don’t have to live the way you’re living.” Each of them is intended to show us a better way.

One of the ways that we are asked to respond to this invitation is to use another set of words. After the Imposition of Ashes, we will recite the Litany of Penitence. Those words provide us with a comprehensive diagnosis of our condition. They also give us the opportunity to speak openly to God about sin. The Litany is a form of

confession, both corporate and individual. It allows us to admit things that we mostly prefer to keep hidden.

The Litany should not be taken lightly. We are not supposed to utter its words casually, but neither are we meant to use them as a weapon against ourselves.

Let me explain what I mean by giving an example from another religious tradition. Each autumn, our Jewish brothers and sisters, as they prepare to celebrate the High Holy Days, are asked to undertake an inventory of their lives. Ash Wednesday, with its Litany of Penitence, asks us to undertake a similar inventory. But Tzvi Freeman, an American Hasidic rabbi, asks his people to proceed carefully, to be wise, to be somewhat gentle with themselves. The annual inventory is meant to help, not harm. Freeman tells his readers not to get stuck on their sins. He asks them to be honest, but he also urges them not to construct a false narrative about being worthless or beyond redemption.²

As I read Rabbi Freeman's words recently, I sensed the truth of them. The Litany of Penitence, the sacramental Rite of Reconciliation, should never be an indictment and nothing more. The confessor must certainly help us do the work of discernment, but he or she is never just a judge.

² https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1625044/jewish/Repentance-Is-a-Trap.htm

When we find the courage to talk out loud about our sins, then we also deserve to hear about God's mercy and love. That is why we pray, "Restore us, good Lord, and let your anger depart from us," and "Accomplish in us the work of your salvation." Confession is a decision to move toward God, and it involves an expectation that our dialogue with God will contain "living words" that "awaken our souls, give them light and hope, and set them free."

Why is this? Because confession, however it is made, is not about humiliation. It is meant to restore broken relationship. It is language, however inadequate, designed to heal what is broken and to restore what has been severed. It is refusing to become stuck on our sins. For Christians, this means at least two things. First, our life in Christ should not be static. The psalmist says, "Hearken to my voice, O Lord, when I call; have mercy on me and answer me. [Lord,] you speak in my heart and say, 'Seek my face.' Your face, Lord, will I seek" (Psalm 27:7–8) Second, for us, this seeking and this being sought has everything to do with Jesus. We see the Father in Jesus. Jesus brings us to the Father. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, comes to find us when we are lost or when we believe that we are not worth the seeking. But Jesus tells us tonight that that is not true. He urges us to find our true heart, which, he says, is the only real treasure. How strange this is: telling the truth about ourselves in the presence of God is one of the ways in which we learn about our true selves. It is one of the ways in which we reverse Adam and

Eve's flight from God, naked and ashamed, in the Garden. It is one of the ways in which we move toward God, trusting in this ancient promise, "You will seek the Lord your God, and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul. In your distress, when all these things have happened to you in time to come, you will return to the Lord your God and heed him. Because the Lord your God is a merciful God, he will neither abandon you nor destroy you; [and] he will [never] forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them" (Deuteronomy 4:29–31).

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Copyright © 2019 The Society of the Free Church of St. Mary the Virgin, New York, New York.

All rights reserved.