

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

March 1, 2017

Ash Wednesday

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. Amen.

Good morning.

I did something to my back while weedeating late last year, and the painful muscle clinches returned a couple weeks ago. As a result, I spent a rare, full day alone, and doing next to nothing outside of scarfing leftover pizza; eating Blue Bell straight from the carton(s); and watching six movies – six! – I had DVR'd during an HBO free-preview weekend. I prefer to save the good titles to watch with Missy, so I labored to clear the recorder of the mediocre-to-awful ones. The mediocre selections included *Straight Outta Compton* and *I Am Legend*, while the newest *Rambo* (yes, Sly made one this millennium) punctuated the awful end of the continuum.

Somewhere between those two was the throwaway Vince Vaughn picture, *Unfinished Business*, a movie I can't imagine you've heard of, much less seen. In this 2015 feature, Vaughn plays Dan Trunkman, a down-on-his-luck salesman working to close a big deal with the help of his two hapless colleagues...with supposed hilarity due to ensue. Amidst the dreck, one scene unexpectedly bit into me.

See, while travelling, Trunkman corresponds with his family via Facetime. In one such exchange, Dan's wife confides that their adolescent daughter, Bess, had experienced a bullying incident at school, and she asks Dan to address the situation. When the young girl's face enters Dan's laptop screen, he stares into his computer and quickly begins to address his daughter before she can even speak:

Hey, Bess...I'm in Germany for work – still – a little longer. I gotta go to this meeting in just a second...but, honey, I want you to know that I'd like to be with you now. I bet you're feeling blue. Baby, bullies are the worst. Their parents are terrible people. But, Bess, [bullies] grow up to have lives without anybody being able to love them. It's true: no one to love them. I love you, honey. [Bye for now...]"

As Dan speaks, we watch Bess' countenance fall, and fall, and fall, and before the big reveal of the bullying video shows the truth we feared, we already know: Bess wasn't the victim...Bess was the aggressor, and her dad's words linger painfully: "Bess, bullies are the worst...they grow up to have lives without anybody being able to love them."

There *is* a holiness to this season of Lent and its focus on repentance. Each year, I look forward to unloading the burden of my sin, giving over to God the freight of failures and shortcomings my back is simply not strong enough to bear alone. Indeed and as I have confessed, I'm better at Lent than I am at Easter: which is to say that I can more easily acknowledge my sins than celebrate God's Love.

Attendantly, the Lenten journey presents dangers. Rather than receiving the reassurance of God's Grace through the admission of our weakness, we, like Bess, may receive instead the confirmations we fear most: *Are you feeling blue? Well, you are the worst. You have nobody to love you. You are your failures.* And there is no Hollywood hyperbole and humor in the experience.

Be clear: I do not intend to let us off the hook too easily: God, and the Church that Jesus commissioned, call us to make an honest appraisal of our moral, social, and physical conditions. That work is important...but the labor is faithful only if undertaken in the promise of God's unfailing Love...*The work of Lent is important, but the labor is faithful only if undertaken in the promise of God's unfailing Love.* In the very same breath that we just prayed to God, "worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness," we proclaim our Lord as the "God of all mercy." Yes, and in a few moments when we will particularize our failures in such painful detail, we will also declare God's perfect forgiveness...not as a cue to God, but as a reminder to ourselves.

We do well, then, to enter this season with its telos close at hand – close at heart, and close at mind – namely, that we will not conclude our Lenten exploration with our "wretchedness"...*this is not where the Lenten story ends!* Rather, today we seek to discover again that where we are weak, God is strong...where we fail, God redeems...and where we may fall short, God will carry us: always and always and always and always.

Therefore, Dear People of God, I invite you to stand...remembering that the first Christians observed with great devotion the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection, and it became the custom of the Church to prepare for them by a season of penitence and fasting. This season of Lent provided a time in which converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism. It was also a time when those who, because of notorious sins, had been separated from the body of the faithful were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness, and restored to the fellowship of the Church. Thereby, the whole congregation was put in mind of the message of pardon and absolution set forth in the Gospel of our Savior, and of the need which all Christians continually have to renew their repentance and faith.

I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word. And, to make a right beginning of repentance, and as a mark of our mortal nature, let us now kneel before the Lord, our maker and redeemer...