

Pastor Roy's Sermon from Ash Wednesday Service February 13, 2013

T.S. Elliott "Ash Wednesday" (First verse)

Because I do not hope to turn again
Because I do not hope
Because I do not hope to turn
Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope
I no longer strive to strive towards such things
(Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?)
Why should I mourn
The vanished power of the usual reign?

Because I do not hope to know again
The infirm glory of the positive hour
Because I do not think
Because I know I shall not know
The one veritable transitory power
Because I cannot drink
There, where trees flower, and springs flow, for there is nothing
again

Because I know that time is always time
And place is always and only place
And what is actual is actual only for one time
And only for one place
I rejoice that things are as they are and
I renounce the blessed face
And renounce the voice
Because I cannot hope to turn again
Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something
Upon which to rejoice

And pray to God to have mercy upon us
And pray that I may forget
These matters that with myself I too much discuss
Too much explain
Because I do not hope to turn again
Let these words answer
For what is done, not to be done again
May the judgment not be too heavy upon us

Because these wings are no longer wings to fly
But merely vans to beat the air
The air which is now thoroughly small and dry
Smaller and dryer than the will
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still.

Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death
Pray for us now and at the hour of our death.

Eliot's poem is a confession of dustiness. It's a poem about the humility of Ash Wednesday. Our days are filled with struggle, if we are honest. We struggle within and without. We wrestle with God, we wrestle with our neighbor. We try to prove ourselves. We are tempted to feel better about ourselves by creating enemies. We don't even have to try. It comes naturally. We try to prop up our weakness with appearances of strength. Then we come to this day, the beginning of Lent, and we are faced with this humble reality that we are dust. If we take Eliot's advice, and Jesus' advice and Paul's—and learn to sit still and allow God's mercy to flow over us and our neighbor, perhaps we will learn to listen and love. Perhaps we will find the seeds of contentment and trust in the very humility which frustrates us day after day.

We are tempted to give up the struggle by covering up our uncertainty with false certainty. If we fall to the temptation and exchange our questions for final answers, then we will walk away from Lent—no longer seeking, waiting, hoping. Instead, substituting an idolatry—the wrong kind of contentment. Content with my version rather than remaining open to the Spirit's invitation to live and be content with the limitless mercy of God.

What is the goal of Lent? [We could name many] --Perhaps to learn contentment and trust? Imagine if we could be content and trust. Content with the life we are granted. Content to accept the gifts we are given. Content to release the things we cannot keep or change. Content with the mood swings—let them wash over us. Content with the love around us. Content with the efforts of our friends to be friendly. Content to sit with our own questions even when the answers are nowhere in sight.

And trust that God is watching over me, and us, and all that is important. Trust that our spirits and souls are safe in the care of God **and**. . .our neighbor. Trust that our solitary aloneness is not too lonely, will not drive us to the brink of despair. Content that we are one with God's creation and with those around us. Trust that we will never be lost beyond hope.

Content to trust. Trust that we might be content. That tomorrow will be as good as or maybe better than today. And if it is not, that we might learn to be content with even that.

We *can* nurture contentment and trust within ourselves. Lent *can* be an adventure in faith.

How can we nurture contentment and trust within ourselves?

God provides all we truly need. To look within ourselves to see what we truly need, and accept that it is ours already. This is new life. Dying to self and death that we may come alive in the fullest, best life possible.

So give Lent some thought. Sit with the Spirit and wait for God's merciful life to flow. We might have to sit a very long time. The palm ash on our foreheads is a confession of our lack of answers. It's a sign of our weakness, brokenness, humility. Whether we acknowledge it or not. It's there all the time, this smudge on our foreheads. And that's ok.

May it set us free from the need to prove ourselves or bring others down. May it free us to be united in ministry, in service, into relationship with all those around us.

God teach us contentment and trust this holy Lent. Amen.