



March 1, 2006

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Sue Verboom

ASH WEDNESDAY

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17a

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

“It’s me, it’s me, O Lord”

There are so many things wrong with our world. There are so many places where people are suffering. There are countries where people are stopped in the street and arrested, with no charges being brought against them. There are places where people are machine gunned or shelled, right in front of the eyes of watching children. There are places where there is only contaminated water, where people die of disease, where there is not enough to eat, and malnutrition takes the lives and spirit from the people. There are people who are mugged, killed, raped by others crazed with a driving need for money, power, or drugs. There are people who suffer at the hands of family members through domestic violence and abuse. There are sicknesses and birth defects that we fear might be the result of pollution. There are oil spills, animals dying dreadful deaths, nature defaced and destroyed.

We deplore the evils of our world- all the suffering, the wrongs and injustice. THEY shouldn’t let this happen. Governments should be just. Corrupt leaders should be somehow done away with. Those who feed off the flesh of the poor should be stopped. THEY shouldn’t get away with their abuse and crimes. THEY should be locked up, brought to justice, executed. THEY shouldn’t be allowed to pollute, to put innocent people in danger of chemical poisoning, to crash oil tankers and spoil our world. THEY must be stopped! SOMEONE should do SOMETHING about THEM.

This way of thinking and feeling is natural and commonplace. But as we begin our Lenten season with this Ash Wednesday worship we are reminded that we don’t have the power to control THEM. We don’t have the ability to force others to be or do anything. We certainly can support legislation and movements that seek justice, that seek a safe environment, that support human rights and resist oppressive forces. But always, always, always, we do everything by making decisions for ourselves, about

ourselves, as to what WE will be and do. THEM- we don't have the power to change. US- ourselves, ME- myself- that's where I always have to begin.

On Ash Wednesday, we gather as a community in repentance, seeking God's forgiveness and renewal. Each of us comes here before God to pray for our own forgiveness. The wrongs and sins of the world need to be addressed FIRST by our self-examination. We come before God saying, "It's me, it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer." You may remember that old gospel song. So often we know exactly the wrongs and sins of our mothers, our fathers, our brothers, our sisters, the deacons, the preachers, our fellow church members. We can describe their wrongs and failings in detail!

This cannot be our starting place, our focus. Scripture reminds us that to take the speck out of our brother's eye, we first have to deal with the great big huge chunk of wood completely obscuring our own vision. That's what we are here to do this evening. We are here to ask God to help us with the logs in our own eyes. We stand before God in our need of prayer.

Let us pray:

It's me, God, standing in the need of prayer. I need your forgiveness for my attitudes of superiority- for the ways I consider myself better than others, even unconsciously- for feeling myself superior because of my race being the "right" one in our society— for feeling myself superior because I understand a complicated idea better than another—for feeling myself superior because I'm an adult and have years of life and experience a young person doesn't have--- for feeling myself superior because the aged person I'm helping sometimes is disoriented. God forgive me. I am not better than any of your precious sons and daughters. I am not worth more for any of the gifts you have given me.

It's me, God, standing in the need of prayer. I need your forgiveness for my attitudes of inferiority- for the times I am sure I am worthless--- because I didn't know a fact that others expected me to know—because I didn't have a clever response to a put-down—because I didn't accomplish something I considered important—because I did something thoughtless, even cruel. God, forgive me. I am not worse than any of your precious daughters and sons. I am not worth less because I lack gifts others possess.

It's me, God, standing in the need of prayer. Forgive me for the ways in which I make victims of other people. Forgive me for thinking I am entitled to live in comfort, while more than half the world's people live in hardship. Forgive me the ways I wound others- with my indifference, my hostility, my words, actions, anger, lashing out and violence. You have given me great power, Lord, and I abuse that power by hurting others.

It's me, God, standing in the need of prayer. Forgive me for the ways I allow others—and even myself!- to make me a victim. Forgive me for not paying attention to my needs and feelings--- for thinking they don't matter as much as another's---for putting my needs on the shelf until I am so angry deep inside I explode, and send shrapnel flying. Forgive me for allowing others to take advantage of me, for even co-operating as they do that. You have given me great power, Lord, and I do not always use it to care for your holy temple, my own self.

It's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer tonight- and every night of my life. I have sinned, fallen short of what you want for me. I need your forgiveness and help. I know my brothers and sisters do, too. I pray for them as well. I ask you to guide us, to help us stop fishing around in each other's eyes for splinters. Teach us to come to you in trust, to lift our faces to you—so you can look into our eyes and remove the painful chunks of wood that make our lives so difficult.

We want to be reconciled to you, God, We want to be close to you, Then we can be fellow-workers WITH you. Then we are prepared to meet the hurt, evil and suffering of the world. Then, we may be ready to interact with all of THEM out there who distress us so much.

This Lenten season reminds us of our sin—we need your forgiveness and are lost without it.

This Lenten season reminds us of our eventual death—life is precious and brief- we don't have forever to get it right!

Send us your Spirit Lord. Teach us your ways. Grant us forgiveness, mercy and love—so we might become agents of forgiveness, mercy and love ourselves. Amen.