

Sermon for Ash Wednesday

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Life is hard. Lent is hard. Both are hard enough in normal times, and then we go and drop all sorts of baggage on 'em. Things like shame and guilt and a whole should-load of stuff we either put on ourselves or other people so generously put on us (as though we didn't have enough to carry on our own). I'm reminded of the command to "love your neighbor as yourself." Yes, it's important and a fine guide to how we're instructed to encounter, serve, even love others. Great. But if any part of you is like me, sometimes I wonder if my neighbors deserve that, deserve to be loved like I love myself. And no, I don't mean "are they good enough." I mean, am I good enough. If I love my neighbors as I love myself, is that really a gift to them? Or does that actually mean all the shames and guilts and shoulds I carry become expectations I lay on them? Put differently, I've got some days that are worse than others, and if I caught myself saying the things I say to myself to someone else, I'd be mortified. For a lot of us, it's a whole lot harder to love ourselves than it is to love our neighbors. "Love your neighbor as yourself" works wonderfully for some, but sometimes it's just as important to turn it around and love ourselves as we love our neighbors.

This Ash Wednesday, I don't think we need a lot of reminders of our mortality or the parts of us that need repair or the broken relationships that need mending. It's impossible to escape the long list of examples permeating every phone screen, computer screen, TV screen. Brokenness? Yeah, we know from brokenness. Y'all don't need beating over the head with hard truths; today's liturgy does enough of that. So instead, I want to share with you what my Lenten discipline is going to be, well, my second discipline after the one I mentioned Sunday.

Loving my neighbor comes relatively easy. Loving myself, that one's for my therapist. Loving my enemy? Oh, now that one's hard, and because it's so hard, that's probably where I need to dig in the most. And the fact that I hate saying it out loud and it makes me scrunch up my face like I smelled something rotten, that's about as good an indication as any that I need to work on this. So, I'm gonna work on loving my enemy. To be clear, loving enemies doesn't mean they become above reproach. It doesn't remove the need for consequences or even my call for consequences. It means seeking to find the person, broken or wounded or whatever they are, seeking the person underneath all the reprehensible things I see in them. It just might be they have a hard time loving their neighbors 'cause they lack love, too. I don't quite know what the practices look like just yet. Ever the procrastinator, I'm still working this out, but I know what I'll be practicing toward. I'm reminded of a modern mini-parable, though. Two men walking down the sidewalk see a homeless man sitting on the ground. One looks at the other and says, "there but by the grace of God, go I." The other stops and says, "no, you've got it wrong. He IS you. You're no better, no different. You are him, and he is you. He has the same feelings, same fears, same hungers you do. And maybe if you could see that, you'd learn to love him."

It's so easy to see anger, fear, panic, whatever, it's so easy to see in my enemy's faces, even in their actions. And it's so easy to condemn it when they act from that place, as though I've never been angry, afraid, or panicked. But of course, I have been. These days, it's a whole lot easier to get that way. But when *I* do it, it's justified, at least, that's what I've gotten in the habit of telling myself. There's a new-ish word coined in a book called "The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows" that I think gets at this idea. The word is "sonder," and it's a noun. You ever heard that word, "sonder?" Sonder is "the feeling one has on realizing that every other individual one sees has a life as full and real as one's own, in which they are the central character and others, including oneself, have secondary or insignificant roles." I've had a profound sense of sonder lately when it comes to all the horror we've been witnessing, but most of it's been directed at the ones being targeted. The perspective from their shoes is far too easy to imagine, and it's been disturbingly fascinating to hear experiences so distant from my own. But something in my soul resists the concept of sonder when it comes to the people in masks. And if ever

there was an argument for taking those damn masks off, it's the way the masks remove their humanity, both for them and for those who face them. They need to be reminded that they are human as much as I need to be reminded that they are human.

When we put those ashes on here shortly, we'll be marking ourselves with our own marker of humanity. Those ashes remind us that nothing here is permanent, maybe not even humanity's tendency to fall under the thrall of fear and anger and greed. People, systems, philosophies, hatreds die. And while we move in this wilderness where reminders of death abound, remember we do this with the confidence that Easter is just 40 short days away. It's not *that* long to love.