

## Sermon by the Rev. Christopher D. Girata

*Preached at Saint Luke's Episcopal Church – Birmingham, Alabama*

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

(Ash Wednesday)

22 February 2012

When I was a child, I always attended the early service on Ash Wednesday, receiving ashes on my forehead before going to school. Although I found the whole ritual fascinating and a bit fun (getting dirty while at church seemed so wild), I was always left with one of the most daunting theological dilemmas – do I leave the ashes on my forehead all day, or wash them off? And of course, the problem was compounded, because if I decided to leave them on my head all day, what would happen when I absent-mindedly wipe my forehead and smear the ashes all over myself making them look like a massive smudge rather than a somewhat-discernible cross shape...

This day marks the beginning of the season of Lent. Lent is a time each year when we prepare ourselves to receive the gift of God's full grace and love through the resurrection of Jesus at Easter. And we mark this day by putting a physical, tangible symbol on our faces. The ashes we are about to receive can be symbolic of many things, but fundamentally, the mark of ash on our face is intended to remind us that change is inevitable. Ashes remind us that how life is today is not how life will be tomorrow. There was a point in time before we were born and there will be a point in time when we will no longer be alive. On this day, ashes remind us that life is short, so how we choose to live our life really matters.

And because our choices are critical, ashes also call us to repent. Repentance is the point of this worship service. To repent means *to turn* toward God and away from those things which separate us from God. That turning, that repenting, takes many shapes, not least of which is in Lenten disciplines. How many of us have thought about what we will give up or what we will take on this Lent in order to prove our repentant resolve? No matter how we choose to turn toward God, we have the chance to begin that turn today when we receive ashes. When we receive ashes, we approach

the altar, under the cross, just as we are, but when we *turn back* toward our seats, we will be physically changed. When we *turn back* toward our seats, we will be marked. When we sit back down, we will have been turned by God, but only we can make that turn stick once when we leave.

As I considered this day and this great invitation to turn toward God, I remembered a movie from years ago that had a profound effect on me, *Dead Man Walking*. *Dead Man Walking* is based on the true story of Sister Helen Prejean, a catholic nun, and her relationship with death row inmate, Michael Poncelet, during the final days before his execution. Convicted of murdering a young, teenage couple, Michael Poncelet is a sexist, racist, and unremorseful man who, in a last desperate attempt to stay alive, asks Sister Helen to help him with a final, legal appeal. Although their time together starts out rough, after many visits, Sister Helen and Poncelet develop a true relationship that begins to change Poncelet's heart. After his final appeal is denied, Poncelet faces the reality that he will die and he falls apart. You see, even though he had been sentenced to death and had been awaiting execution for years, Poncelet still couldn't believe that he would actually die. He simply couldn't accept that his life would end.

And I understand that feeling. Here we are, participating in a service that is an explicit reminder of our own mortality, yet I struggle to fully comprehend that one day, I will die. For most of us, death is indeed a sobering idea, but still very much an idea. Few of us have ever faced the stark reality – the raw truth – that we will not live forever. I don't want to die – no one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there.

When Poncelet finally faces the reality that he will die, he reveals his greatest fear to Sister Helen, confessing to her that he did kill the teenage couple and for that, he knows he can never be forgiven. Yet there, in his cell, Sister Helen tells him he's wrong. She tells him that God will forgive him if only he is truly sorry. As Poncelet breaks down and weeps, Sister Helen continues to speak and she calls him a "son of God." He takes a deep breath, looks up into her eyes, and says that he has never been called that before. There, awaiting his imminent death, that young man heard for the first time that he was a child of God.

Today we are marked with ashes to remind us that we are only in this life for a little while, that we only live this life once, and that as we live, God lives with us. The ashes remind us that joy conquers heartache, that hope conquers despair, that love wins. Whether you have been told all your life or you are hearing this for the first time, hear me now: You are loved. You are a child of God. Come to the altar and receive ashes. Come to the altar just as you are and receive ashes that mark you as a beloved child of God. Let the truth of that mark wash over you, soak into you, fill you with the Spirit of the God who created you and who loves you and who walks with you. Come forward under this cross and receive ashes that rest on your head but mark your heart, a true mark of God's love for you today and forever.

Amen.