

Ash Wednesday March 6, 2019

Humanity is Not a Plague

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A stand-up comedian and actor recently made a statement that offended quite a few people. Being a comedian, the statement is intended to be funny, although in a dark way, because like most comedy, he was attempting to say something we find humorous because we know what he says is true on some level.

The statement was actually made by a fictional character the comedian played and wrote for a series on Netflix and was made while the character was dealing with the loss of his spouse; when everything about human beings either irritated or upset him. Because he was grieving, every person he saw reminded him of the happiness he no longer had. His statement came from a place of deep pain. Which is quite obvious in the full statement that says: "Humanity is a plague. We're a disgusting, narcissistic, selfish parasite."

When taken out of context, it is easy to see how someone might be offended by that statement. It is condemning. There is no hope in it. No offer of forgiveness. No liberation. No redemption. And maybe we can see where the character is coming from. It is pretty hard to deny that we human beings can and do, intentionally and unintentionally, regularly cause tremendous harm to each other, to the earth, to the other creatures who share this planet with us. It can be very easy to get stuck in a place of anger and resentment toward the human race, and to begin to imagine the world would be better off without us.

But that is not what the character who made the statement ended up believing at the end of the series. Eventually he found healing when love found him, as love has a way of doing. And even if the same comedian is now on tour riffing on the ways human beings succeed in irritating him and condemning all humanity for it, I don't believe him when he says humanity is a plague. It's just his way of getting attention and laughs.

I don't believe him because humanity can be a lot worse than irritating, we can be downright terrible to each other, to the earth, and to God. And yet, despite our tendency to sin, to think only of ourselves and getting what we want without considering the cost, or our lazy neglectfulness, or even worse, to fail to listen to God, to not care about our relationship with God, God – who is love - does not fail to find us and continues to reach out to us, to offer us ways to return to the love that made us. That is what today is about.

One of my favorite prayers in the Book of Common Prayer is the one that we heard at the start of this service, where we said God hates nothing God has made. I love that. Because one of the things we might hear on the news or from various preachers is that God hates certain people. But I don't believe them. Because that is not what the prayer for this day says, and it is not what Jesus ever said. Jesus told us over and over that God loves, and that is important because of what this day – Ash Wednesday – is about, and how the season ahead of us, the season of Lent came to be.

In the very early years of the church, many followers of Jesus suffered from persecutions, when those in power went after Christians and attempted to destroy the Christian faith by killing off Jesus' followers or getting them to renounce their faith. Sometimes those in power succeeded, and people fled from the church. But when the persecutions were over, some of those who had fled expressed regret for their decision and asked to return to the Church. This request was understandably challenging for those who had stayed faithful during the persecutions. Yet after prayer and reflection, they decided forgiveness is one of the practices of the way of following Jesus. Thus, began a special time or season for the whole church – for those who had left and wished to return, and those who had endured and remained. Today we call that time or season Lent. It was not a time of judgment or condemnation. It was a time for everyone to acknowledge the sinful stuff that led to them renouncing their faith and running away. And the sinful stuff of false pride that made it tempting to want to judge and punish those who had run away. So that everyone could acknowledge the ways they all fell short of God's Love, and ask for forgiveness from each other and from God, believing God forgives and welcomes all people. So Lent was really about restoration – restoring people back to the church, to the Body of Christ and to a closer relationship with God. It was a season of hope, a belief that Jesus' resurrection really is the beginning of a new way of living and being, one that welcomes everyone. That welcome also came to include those new to the faith, and Lent took on the added dimension of teaching those who wanted to become Christians, preparing them to be baptized as part of the great celebration of Easter.

To the early church, Lent was a time to acknowledge the terrible things people had done, and at the same time served as a reminder that we are loved by God, forgiven, and therefore capable of great love ourselves. As an outward and visible sign of gratitude for that forgiveness, there were practices they did called penitence. That is where fasting during Lent comes in. Not just for the days of the early church, but for those of us who follow Jesus today. Fasting is often talked about as refraining from eating fatty foods or desserts but fasting is intended to be a deeper practice. It can be refraining from eating for a period of time, like a day, in order to feel pangs of hunger

and pray through them, because that is what millions of people all over the world do every day. It can be refraining from mindless consuming in order to discover a connection and love for people who have less than we do. Fasting is intended to develop a deeper sense of gratitude and appreciation for God and our dependence on God and perhaps develop a new respect for people who recognize that dependence.

Fasting can also be a way to let go of practices that get in the way of our relationship with God, to think about those things that prohibit our ability to love God with our whole heart, mind, strength, and soul and can get in the way of our ability to love our neighbors or even to love ourselves as God loves us. I'm talking about things like anger, grudges, the rebellious refusal to forgive. Or prejudice, the belief that that one kind of people is better than another. Or judgment of a person based on stereotypes. It's not hard to think of additional things. In a little while we'll be saying the Litany of Penitence – remember a litany is just a churchy word that means list – and this litany is a long list of sins. It might be worth paying close attention to the words in that litany, especially any that stand out to you, because they might be signaling what has recently been inhibiting you from loving God and your neighbors. This exercise isn't meant to shame anyone, it is meant to open our hearts to what we might need to let go of or change in this season of Lent so that we can grow closer to God and to each other and experience the renewal and restoration that is at the heart of the season.

Because that is what today is about. Ash Wednesday is the reminder that God hates nothing God has made. God made humanity in God's own image, and when God looked at what God had made God loved it so much God called humanity and all the world Very Good. We are not a plague. We were made by God to be part of God's dream of caring for all that God made: the world and everything in it, and that includes each other. Maybe that is why God made humanity from the dust of the earth, hoping it would make us feel the loving connection between our home and ourselves and maybe even our creator.

But the creation story tells us fear and blame got in our way of living into that love. They still do. But fear and blame are not the last words, resurrection is. And resurrection is God's way of saying God will not throw away anything or anyone God has made, and loves. And God loves you.

In just a minute or two, we'll be reminded of the gift of life God has given us, the life that will not last forever in this world because of our dusty origins as dusty ashes will be placed on our foreheads. Those ashes can also remind of our connection to the earth, and that we will return to that from which we came. Which means both life and death are a gift from God. Both are nothing to fear. Because there is something

binding them together so that death is not an ending, but a beginning. That is why the cross will be made our foreheads with ashes, the cross is the symbol of God's redeeming love. May the ashes in the shape of a cross on our foreheads this day put us in mind of the hope of redemption and restoration to God and God's community and be the start of a deeper welcome to resurrection life.