

“More Than Bad-Tasting Medicine”

Joel 2:1, 12–14; Is. 58:1–12; 2 Cor. 5:20b – 6:10; Matt. 6:1–6, 16–21

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

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All cultures and religions have rituals and traditions that are deeply meaningful for insiders but absurd to outsiders. I think of the Christmas custom in Prague described by CBF field personnel of eating carp for Christmas dinner. Said carp would be purchased on the street, whopped on the head, chopped up, and taken home to cook and eat, or bought early and placed in a tub at home until the time would come to take said carp, now likely given a name by children in the family, whop it on the head, cut it up, and prepare it. Either way, it would be carp for dinner...

But we have traditions that must seem strange to others, like this service. We read scripture, sing songs, and offer prayers, like at other services, but the focus is on placing ashes made from palm fronds from last year’s Palm Sunday on our foreheads in the shape of a cross, as we speak the words, “From dust you have come; to dust you will return.” The ritual itself is unusual, a throwback to ancient practices of mourning and repentance, but the meaning is even more jarring. These ashes are a reminder of our frailty and finitude. We gather to be reminded of these things? Christians around the world choose to do this?

Well, some things are needful, even if they are not desirable, but strange as this ritual may seem, it is not simply a kind of bad-tasting medicine that is good for us. It is a liberating experience, one that frees us from oppressive forces that block our path to fulfillment. Underneath the everyday joys and challenges we face, there are deeper existential realities we cannot avoid, like matters of identity but also the two objects of focus on Ash Wednesday — sin and death. We cannot escape them. If we try, they simply drain us of energy. This service invites us to face these realities, in the context of grace and hope, so as to be set free.

The first existential reality to confront is frailty or sin. The texts for this evening call us again and again to repent or return, to be

reconciled to God, to own our flaws and failures and receive the grace God extends. In scripture, this call to repentance is not simply personal, it is communal. Each individual is accountable, called to a more righteous path of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, according to Jesus. But when prophets like Joel and Isaiah issue the call to repentance, the entire nation is included. Loosening the bonds of injustice and letting the oppressed go free are not simply personal actions. Sin is personal, social, and systemic, and thus it must be confronted on all these levels.

This sounds obvious, but while we may try to avoid acknowledging personal failure, we often try to dismiss even the possibility that social and national shortcomings are spiritual concerns. They are. Racism, for example, is not just personal, it is social and systemic. It cannot be overcome until we realize this. Yet the beginning place for all change is acknowledgment, naming our sin, owning up to the fact that we fall short of God's intent.

The good news is acknowledgment is met not with judgment but with grace. "God is gracious and merciful," says Joel, "slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." "God made him (Christ) to be sin who knew no sin," says the Apostle Paul, writing to the church at Corinth. We need not avoid our frailty and sin out of fear. God awaits prodigals as a patient parent with open arms, ever ready to embrace us in love.

This reality frees us to quit allowing our struggles to sap away energy. The very essence of the gospel claims that we are saved by grace and grace alone. There is nothing we can do to make God love us more and there is nothing we can do to make God love us less. That is liberating because we are freed from not just guilt but the debilitating desire to prove ourselves to God, to our parents, or to anyone else.

Some years ago, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a book entitled *How Good Do We Have to Be?* In it, he addresses the theological, cultural, and familial realities that pressure us to excel at everything, if not be perfect. He talks about a friend who works himself to death trying to earn his father's blessing, which will be difficult to get, since he has been dead for fifteen years. He describes a woman looking at five magazine covers near a checkout line at a grocery store, all of which picture the "ideal woman" in unreachable form, as Kushner wonders if she will

feel inadequate or be wise enough to realize that age and genetics play tricks on us all. He quotes a young Episcopal rector dying of AIDS who says he tried so hard to be perfect so that his parents, teachers, and God would love him. And he names the unrealistic expectations we often have of our children, noting that a friend of his said that being disappointed has become a uniquely middle-class form of child abuse.

To be clear, there are things we should feel guilty about, and parental expectations can be an expression of love. But we should feel badly about doing certain things, not about ourselves for being bad people. And any love that has to be earned is not really love. God's love does not work this way, it is unconditional, and it is the model for all love. God's love invites us to make peace with the reality that we are all frail and flawed, imperfect creatures who fall short of the glory of God. Knowing that we are loved, no matter what, makes it a lot easier to own our frailty and sin.

The second existential reality to confront is finitude, I know, not the happiest of subjects, but death is the one thing all living creatures have in common, and dealing with it is essential to a full life. I have often noted that one of the central challenges of receiving a so-called "terminal diagnosis" is finding a way to continue living fully, even with an awareness that our life will end. But to state the obvious, something preachers love to do, we all have a terminal diagnosis. Life always ends in death. We may be able to avoid thinking about this reality in a conscious way in this culture longer than in most times and places of human history, but the reality still exists and subconsciously it has power over us, whether we realize it or not. Thus, we have a need to address it in some way to limit its influence.

Simply acknowledging our mortality is a beginning, and we do at least this much in this service. From dust you have come, to dust you will return. It doesn't get much clearer than that. But naming a reality like this and the fear that goes with it doesn't give it more power. On the contrary, naming our demons is a step in taking control over them. Death doesn't take away the meaning of life. It can heighten meaning, making each moment precious and sacred.

Yet, as is the case with frailty, our faith offers something more in regard to finitude — not a way to cheat death, but hope for something beyond it. We impose ashes this evening, but we do so in the shape of a cross. It is a reminder of Jesus' death and our salvation. The cross is a central symbol of our faith, but it does not stand alone. The Jesus story entails life, death, and life after death; incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. These realities are part of one great cosmic event revealing God's love for the world.

So, while it may be a little cumbersome to have one image combining a manger, a cross, and an empty tomb, all these realities are implied with any one image. We cannot see a cross without imagining an empty tomb. Thus, the cruciform shape of our imposed ashes anticipates the hope of resurrection. When we join Christ in death, we also embrace the hope of resurrection, and that hope is liberating.

The early church said that when we are baptized, we die — to old ways, to sin and frailty, yet also to fear — so that we can rise to embrace fully a new life of hope and peace. Once we have died, nothing can threaten us anymore, not even death itself. We are alive in Christ now and forevermore. The early church proclaimed this in a time of persecution, a time before modern medicine and sanitation, a time when death was a very real possibility every day. But what is there to fear when you have already died, when death itself has been overcome by life?

Someone has said that if we have to swallow a bunch of frogs, we might as well swallow the biggest frog first. It is a lovely image, especially right after supper, the pasta was supposed to be vegetarian. But the message is clear enough. Sin and death are two of the biggest proverbial frogs we have to swallow, two of the most pressing existential challenges of life. Ash Wednesday presents an opportunity to face these challenges. In fact, all of Lent presents such an opportunity. We are loved just as we are and God's love is everlasting, as are we. This is more than bad-tasting medicine. It is an invitation to liberation. We need not feel bound anymore.