

Text: Matthew 6: 5-18
Title: Ash Wednesday Meditation
Date: 03.01.17
Roger Allen Nelson

Reza Aslan is a journalist and a Muslim. He recently offered this distinction.

Faith is mysterious and ineffable. It is an emotional, not necessarily a rational, experience... And yet, in the end, faith is nothing more, or less than a choice... Religion, on the other hand, is the language we use to express faith. It is the language made up of symbols and metaphors that allows people to express to each other and to themselves what is, almost by definition, inexpressible.

I sort of like that...

Faith is the mystery; religion is the symbol.
Faith is the reality; religion is the signpost.
Faith is inexpressible; religion is its expression.

We gather tonight, with Christians throughout the world and throughout history, to pray, sing, read scripture, sit in silence, and smudge our foreheads with ash. We gather in faith for a religious practice. In the face of a mystery we offer a signpost.

It is a signpost of sorrow or repentance for sin.
It is the first step of Lent ~ a forty-day journey toward the cross, the tomb, and the resurrection.
It is a symbol of our union with Christ. The smudge traces your baptism.
It is a mark of our mortality. We will all die.
It is a signpost of resurrection hope. Even as you die with Christ you will be raised with Christ.

Ash Wednesday means a lot of different things to a lot of different people, but it also holds in tension, the mystery of faith, and the practice of religion. There is both profound mystery and awkward human intimacy. There is both deep trust and public display, both heartfelt longing and tactile expression. In our souls and on our foreheads ~ recognition of finiteness and fallenness. In our souls and on our foreheads ~ faith in the activity of God in Christ.

In Marilyn Robinson's, Pulitzer Prize winning novel, "Gilead," there is a beautiful scene that I think of often. The narrator tells of being a young child when lightning strikes the church steeple and sparks a fire. He remembers the community responding to help ~ gathering as if for a picnic.

Young children played marbles on quilts in the grass. Older boys dug around in the ruins for what could be salvaged. They gathered up all the books that were beyond repair and made two graves, one for the Bibles and one for the hymnals. The Baptist minister prayed before they buried them. The women put out pies and cakes.

And, it was raining,
and the ash turned to liquid in the rain,
and the men who were working got black and filthy.

Then there is this passage:

I remember my father down on his heels in the rain, water dripping from his hat, feeding me a biscuit from his scorched hand, with that old blackened wreck of a church behind him and steam rising where the rain fell on embers, the rain falling in gusts and the women singing "The Old Rugged Cross" while they saw to things, moving so gently, as if they were dancing to the hymn, almost. In those days no grown women ever let herself be seen with her hair undone, but that day even the grand old women had their hair falling down their backs like school girls. It was so joyful and sad. I mention it again because it seems to me much of my life was comprehended in that moment. Grief itself has often returned me to that morning, when I took communion from my father's hand. I remember it as communion, and I believe that's what it was.

I love the image of the calloused-soot-stained-hands.

With soot-stained hands we write and recite liturgies.

We make coffee and tend after the littlest ones.

We pass baskets for offerings and take communion to the infirmed.

With soot-stained hands we wrestle along with kids and the catechism.

We sing with a restrained gusto – as if dancing, almost.

We welcome new friends and see old ones slip away.

With soot-stained hands we serve on committees, quilt quilts, make breakfast with friends in Roseland, and sit next to those on the mourner's bench. We marry and bury, baptize and bless. And I grab hold of this pulpit, like every soot-stained-Hope-preacher before me, and do my level best to break off bread.

You get the idea. I am reminded of and profoundly grateful for those ways that soot-stained people try to stand at the intersection of faith and religion.

I mention it again because it seems to me much of my life was comprehended in that moment.

Dear friends, we hold tenderly the mystery of faith and the practice of religion because so much of our lives are comprehended in those moments...

When we baptize, our identity is signed and sealed in Christ.

When we break bread, and share wine we are sustained in Christ.

When we mark one another with ash we proclaim our hope in Christ.

And, there is something so stripped down in those moments.

Tonight, for example.

We are marked with our mortality and we proclaim our faith.

For while we all know moments of beauty, may even be able to muster some courage or strength, and enjoy days of goodness...

When you scrape everything away, when you get down to what you believe but can't prove, when you're honest, we're left with nothing but faith in Jesus...

This religious practice is the soot-stained reminder that any hope, healing, life, or love will come from outside of us, will come from God...

And so, much of our lives are comprehended in that moment.

So, as we begin this journey of Lent may this religious expression serve to strengthen our faith. Hold it tenderly.

Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.
Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.