

“Acceptable Ashes”

For Ash Wednesday 2013 at Duke Chapel

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, God's Son our Lord Jesus

Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

One of my favorite movies from my childhood is the 1994 Mel Gibson rendition of “Maverick,” the story of Brett Maverick, a prodigy of both cards and pistols, who is on the way to the biggest card game of his life. At one point during his tumultuous journey, Maverick lays his ear to the ground, apparently to listen for the hoof beats of the gang that was sent to stop Maverick from entering the game. Maverick knows they are coming, and that more than just his stake in the game, but his very life is on the line. At this crucial moment, his companion, played by Jodie Foster, asks “Do you hear anything?” Somewhat perplexed, and entirely too complacent, Maverick rolls onto his back and says, “Hear something? No, I’m just trying to get some sleep before nightfall.” With a smug sense of self-assurance, Maverick not only turns away from the warning offered by the hoof beats, but closes his ears entirely.

We gather today to take the cross of Christ in ashes upon our foreheads, in so doing we remember our own mortality, and more so, that Christ took on that mortality in order to give us new life. Yet, though this tradition is pregnant with meaning, we often close our ears entirely to the significance. Rather than turn our ears to listen what is coming for us, we roll over and hope for a few minutes of shuteye.

Isaiah’s prophecy tells us straightforward that ashes without action are simply unacceptable. “Is this the fast that I choose,” proclaims the Lord through

the prophet, "a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn." The trouble with Ash Wednesday is not that we come forth for ashes. It is not that we embrace this physical sign of our contrition. Rather, we forget that this marking is only one step in a process of repentance and renewal. We too easily accept the ashes of our sinfulness and resist our transformation into saints.

Lent is not a seasons for Mavericks. To accept the ashes upon our forehead is to embark again upon the journey of repentance, one begun in grace by the Holy Spirit in our baptism. But as Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us, it is a costly grace that we receive. It is a grace that demands something of us. It is a grace that demands everything of us, and intends to change us. If we take the ashes upon our foreheads but withdraw our hands from the hungry, those are unacceptable ashes. If we take these ashes upon our foreheads and refuse to walk with the poor, then those are unacceptable ashes. If we take these ashes upon our forehead but refuse to give our clothes to warm the naked, or refuse to use our voices on behalf of the voiceless, or refuse to use our God given gifts to welcome the oppressed, to lift up the downtrodden, to lighten the burdens of others, then our ashes are desperately unacceptable.

So, my sisters and brothers, when you turn your head upward to receive these ashes upon your forehead, turn your ear to Isaiah's clarion call, and to all the Lenten texts that call us away from our sleep, and then to attention as God tells us what is coming for us: life, and life abundant. Hear the words proclaimed throughout Lent: that indeed we are mortal, and feeble in that mortality, but that Jesus took that mortality upon Himself with a powerful mercy, one that turns prodigal ashen faces into the very images of God.

Acceptable ashes are those ashes that come as a sign of repentance born out in daily life. Acceptable ashes are the ashes that reveal this image of God to the world by sharing our bread with the hungry, giving hospitality to the homeless, clothing the naked. Acceptable ashes are those ashes that are accompanied by the just mercy of God to a world that desperately needs truth and grace. So come forward. Accept these ashes not as a single act of contrition, but as one portion of a life typified by thankful repentance. Let a phoenix of good works rise from these ashes, not to earn our salvation, for that is only done upon the cross, but to declare that we have received salvation out of the ashes. Give to the world a witness that your light has broken forth from the dawn, has given resurrection from the ashes of death. Don't turn your ears away from the source of new life. Otherwise, we will miss it, and be left sitting in ashes. Amen.

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