

Ash Wednesday
February 10, 2016
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
The Rev. Ian C. Burch

One of my favorite scenes in one of my favorite films pictures a grandmother having a frank conversation with her 7 year old granddaughter. The granddaughter Sarah asks about the nature of life and death, and the grandmother Antonia replies kindly, "This is the only dance we dance."

This is the only dance we dance. These words haunt me every time I see the film. They haunt me as the number of candles on my birthday cake increases. They haunted me when I ministered with the dying in hospital rooms for nine years. They haunt me when friends miscarry; when young people in our city die of violence or neglect. They haunted me as I watched my dad struggle for years with his cancer. These are the words that come to mind in the middle of the night, when the house is quiet and we are alone with our thoughts and our God. This is the only dance we dance.

Twenty-five hundred years ago, the prophet Joel told the people of Israel not to be distracted by things in life that don't matter—by the form. Joel prophesied that fasting for fasting's sake is not pleasing to God. Instead, God desires reconciliation among families and bread for the hungry. God desires the naked to be clothed. Joel went to the priests in the temple and the people in Jerusalem to say that the FORM of the fast, the FORM of the worship doesn't matter. At the end of the day, what we do for each other here on this fragile earth and with these fragile lives is the only sacrifice pleasing to God. This is the only dance we dance, so we had better make it a good one, says Joel. This strikes me as a perfect Lenten message.

The world out there does not believe that life is fleeting. The world out there believes that money can stave off the call of the grave. The world believes that tight bodies and cleverly applied makeup will keep us alive forever. The world out there believes that cachet or status will keep us out of the nursing home. So we waste part of our lives running from our death, even though we know, somewhere deep down, we are not quite fast enough.

We in the church try to live against the grain of the world. And the church in its wisdom has set aside today, 40 days before the feast of the Resurrection of Jesus, as a time of special intention to reflect on the finitude of this life and to examine ourselves and our community. In this insane world of upside down values and outright lies about the nature of life, the church invites us to remember our own mortality. How extraordinary. This may be one of the few places in this world where we're invited to stop and acknowledge the fleeting nature of the magnificent gifts of this life—the changing landscapes of family, of declining health, of gaining and losing wealth, of the fickleness of contentment. The world out there says this party will go on forever; the church reminds us, in the words of Jesus that this is the world that “moth and rust consume.” And that we should not store up our treasures here.

Sunday, we feasted. We ate pancakes and sausage. Yesterday, in the office, we ate donuts and made jokes about Fat Tuesday.. We remembered the goodness of God and of life. Today, we begin our fast. We begin our self examination. We begin the season of Lent. Today we respect our limitations, our mortality, even our sin. Our music will be solemn. Our prayers will be penitent. Our foreheads will be covered in ash. We are accepting the church's invitation into a holy Lent. We will feast again at Easter, never fear, but for now, our hearts are quiet, listening for God in the midst of this crazy world. This is the only dance we dance, my friends. And we will absolutely return to dust.

So, my sisters and brothers, this Lenten season, let our congregation be sanctified, in the words of Joel. Let us by word and action commit to reconciliation with one another and with God Almighty. Let us not be fooled into believing that the FORM of the thing IS the thing. Let us examine our consciences for those rough patches that require naming and God's ever-available forgiveness. And even when it's scary or even when it's painful, let us be honest with one another about the fragile nature of this life. I invite you into the full richness of the season of Lent. Observe the great rituals of the church. Participate with your fellow parishioners in the learning and fellowship and worship opportunities in this Holy Season. Accept this invitation to examine your conscience, to reconcile, to be always forgiven, made new, made whole.

This is the only dance we dance; and I am grateful to dance it with an ever-loving God, and I am grateful to dance it with you faithful people.
Amen.