

Ash Wednesday 2005
February 9, 2005
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

I told our brothers and sisters gathered here at 7 this morning that they were “the early shift.” They ranged in age from about six or seven to eighty-something. I sent them all forth to school and work with ashes on their foreheads. All day long they have been a walking witness to faith. I hope.

At the risk of stating the obvious, I told them that the cross on their brow is a sign to the world that they are Christians. I asked, “If people know nothing about Christ and judges **Him** according to **your** behavior, what are they going to end up thinking?” They might say to themselves, “Here’s someone who’s pretty tight with Christ, if he marches around with that cross in the middle of his forehead all day.” What assumptions will they make about Jesus, based on watching you?? If the onlookers know that you take what isn’t yours, will they think that our Lord condones stealing as long as you’re not caught? If they have heard you running someone down, either by telling an unflattering truth or an outright lie, will they think that Christianity approves of gossip? If they have observed you fall apart frequently, despair at the drop of a hat, and regularly bemoan your fate, will they deduce that ours is a fair weather religion that dissolves in the rain?

Unless one of you is headed out to work the night shift, I don’t think anybody is leaving here to be a witness to the world tonight. I think most of us are plain headed home. We will wash our faces and scrub away the ash. Tomorrow our co-workers, fellow students, neighbors and friends won’t be any the wiser about what we did tonight. In the morning, there won’t be any cross left to tip them off about our faith. So – are we apt to provide them with any other clues???

Only one day out of 365 days a year do we have a physical sign of our belief in Christ traced on our foreheads. The rest of the time people have to figure out for themselves **Whose** we are. I've asked it before, but I'll ask it again – do the people who know you know about your faith? Not because you've been slipping tracts about the four spiritual laws under their office doors or forwarding them Scripture quotes via e-mail, but because you're comfortable telling them about your church family, about your regular presence in worship, about your love of a forgiving God? When someone tells you about a trial they're undergoing, do you ever simply say, "I'll pray for you"? Have you ever invited a lonely friend to accompany you to our soup supper? Ever offered to give a neighbor who can't drive a lift to worship? Ever mentioned the healing service to a coworker coping with a chronic or acute illness?

We prayed a beautiful prayer of confession a short time ago. The final line was:

For idleness in witnessing to Jesus Christ, [and for squandering the gifts of love and grace:] **Holy God, holy and mighty, holy and immortal, have mercy on us.**

"For idleness in witnessing to Jesus Christ..." Have we become lazy? Has our evangelism engine been idling? Are we **tightlipped** about our faith or **anxious** to share the Good News with those who are on the outside looking in?? Are we **complacent** or **committed**?

The fact that you're **here** suggests to me that you're **committed** ☺. You're beginning the forty days of Lent in prayer and with the reception of Holy Communion. There's no better way to begin **any** undertaking. Through this Lenten season of 2005, we'll be looking at Jesus through the lens of the "I Am" sayings we find in St. John's Gospel: "I am the bread of life," "I am the light of the world," "I am the good shepherd,"

“I am the resurrection and the life,” “I am the way and the truth and the life,” “I am the vine and you are the branches.” Next week Ken Olsen will share what it means to **him** that Jesus is the light of the world.... If **you** know Jesus as the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the way and the truth and the life, or as the vine, would you consider sharing your faith from the pulpit one evening soon? Advent and Lent are our special times to hear from those who are usually in the pew.... I put out this call when I preached the weekend of the blizzard, but only about twenty people heard it instead of the usual three hundred ☺. I also put out the call in my Pastor’s Pen in the February issue of *The Lamplighter*. Neither my doorway nor my phone line has been clogged with folks clambering to volunteer.... I confessed in last weekend’s sermon that I can be impatient. I confess tonight that I can also be stubborn. I’m issuing the call again. Listen to whether the Holy Spirit is calling you to be **active**, not **idle**, **public** and not **private** in witnessing to Jesus Christ.

Tonight we are told, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” We are forcefully reminded that our life on this earth is time-limited. We will draw a finite number of breaths, speak a finite number of words, live a finite number of years. The psalmist says, “Teach us to number our days....” Teach us to do today what is most important, because tomorrow is not guaranteed to us. If we would sing His praises, it should be **now**. If we would proclaim His faithfulness, it should be **now**. If we would be little Christs, recognizable not just once a year by ashes on our foreheads, but daily by our loving words and courageous actions, it should be now.

Jesus knows we need a lot of help, so He becomes the Bread of Life. He nourishes us with Himself so that we can feed the world. He strengthens us so we can

reach out to the weak. He forgives us in this sacrament so that we can get out from under the weight of our sins, stand upright with the dignity of the children of God, and forgive others as we have been forgiven. He comforts and gladdens us, renewing our spirit, clearing our vision, sending us out through the servants' entrance into the world.

Children of God, you've been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. Don't keep it a secret ☺. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Olson