

Ash Wednesday  
2/21/07—Chapel of the Cross

In 1970 I was a sophomore at Carolina

and in a moment of youthful enthusiasm joined the Rugby club

37 years later I can remember some of our matches,

but there is one I still struggle to remember fully

It was a gorgeous spring day—and the game was going well.

Although I didn't have enough sense not to play rugby

I did have the good sense to get as far away from the scrum as I could---

(That's where all the guys missing teeth are found)

This means I was a wing---which is the rugby version of wide receiver.

On one play the ball came out of the scrum and was passed down the line to me

I caught it and took off.

I fixed my eyes on the goal line

and knew I would get to my destination through my own determination and skill.

The last thing I remember is being picked up and turned upside down and dropped to the ground-

As---I later learned--“head first”

I blacked out.

When I awoke, I was on the sidelines---

I could not remember what happened.

I could not remember my name or why I was where I was.

Apparently I had had my 15 minutes of fame, because the game had already continued---

So unnoticed, I walked to my car---got in and started driving—

The thing is—I could not remember where I had been,

but I did remember where I needed to go.

I drove to my girlfriend's house---(the woman to whom I am still married)

Knocked on the door and when she opened it, I said “I don't know how I got here,

I don't know who I am,

but I do know this is where I need to be.”

Today we enter the Holy season of Lent---

and let us not dilute it or trivialize it or manipulate it for our own small designs.

Lent is the season to remember to whom we belong

To remember Where we are going as Christians on the Way.

And to remember our true name.

It is not a time to punish ourselves so that we deserve Easter

it is not a time to prove our own spiritual prowess by public displays of piety

And it is not a time to wallow in guilt and bemoan the past.

It's a time to remember—to admit our amnesia and move our feet toward the promised land.

It is a time move away from what keeps us in distracted forgetfulness

and wake up to the reality of our covenant with God and the promise of new life.

Lent has a double movement---

moving away from death

and moving toward life.

So (1) Moving away from death.

I was not an “A” student in college,

but I at least knew that Rugby was not a pathway for sound living.

After that afternoon, I soon stopped playing so that my head wouldn’t get smushed again.

We are called to repent---which is not about wallowing in our wretchedness

But instead to remember our true destiny and destination and change our direction.

To repent is to turn around---

To turn away from that which does not feed the soul

And turn towards home---

*Yet even now, says the Lord*

*Return to me with all your heart*

*Return to the Lord for God is gracious and merciful*

*Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love*

We as Americans are addicted to distraction—we are addicted to forgetfulness

We conspire to keep in perpetual motion—

with the illusion that we can focus on 5 activities at the same time

We think that somehow we have a remote control device not just for our televisions but for our lives and we can have split screens---call waiting---or multi tasking

Which are all means of forgetfulness---

And I wonder if part of this purpose is to prevent us from taking a long hard look

And how we live as individuals and a society.

We keep distracted so that we won’t have to face how far we are from God’s Reign

Of Peace and Justice and Mercy.

When I lived in Athens, Georgia, I drove my daughter to school

And one morning I took a different turn---and found myself driving through

Block after block of low income housing---

I didn't know so many poor people lived in my town—

And I didn't know I had unconsciously conspired to stay uninformed.

When we stop for a moment---it leaves a space for us to see.

What am I doing with my life and what are we doing with our corporate life?

Are our lives consumed with the ways of the world---

Which are all about power, prestige and possessions---

Or God's purposes for us to know abundant life?

Are we headed toward home or are we moving in an entropic circle?

Like the Prodigal son—we are to “come to ourselves”

and put the distant country at our backs and turn toward homes.

We are invited, therefore, to turn away of what keeps us forgetful.

And we are invited to turn toward home.

As you think about the next 40 days, what is it that binds you from abundant life?

What is it that distracts you from the glorious reality of God being incarnated in your life?

What is it that has led you to the distant country far from your true home?

First we turn away from what limits our lives.

And then (2) to move toward home.

When I got to Jo's apartment and she opened the door----

The first thing she said was my name (at least my name back then)—“Bam?”

-and I remembered who I was---

And I held onto Jo and little by little I became reoriented.

So it is in our growth in Christ.

We are only able to move away from the sources of forgetfulness and death  
Because we fall in love with the One who knows our true name---

When we encounter Him, we remember who we are---and why we are here

And where we are going.

Through the waters of baptism we are made Christ's own forever---that's who we are—

We are God's beloved---

and that love gives us the peace that the world cannot give or the world take away.

That love roots us on the firm ground of recollection.

We are here to know and love God more fully and to serve as God's instruments to bring people  
out of forgetfulness into remembrance and out of death into life.

And we are on a journey to the place where we remember fully

The place where we are know even as we are know---

The place where our true face is revealed.

The only power I know to draw us there is the love of God in Christ Jesus---

Like the father in the Prodigal story---his love for his son draws his son home

And the amazing thing is this---even when we forget—that love pulls us.

I couldn't remember Jo's name on that rugby field in 1970

But in ways I could not understand, her love drew me

through the streets of Chapel Hill to her Carrboro apartment.

So it is with God in Christ.

God only needs a crack the size of a mustard seed---and the divine love will pull us out of error into truth/ out of sin into righteousness/ out of death in life.

Let us remember that the word “LENT” means “to Lengthen”

as in the days lengthening as the light pushes away the darkness.

Instead of giving up chocolate, why not discipline yourself

to cultivate an awareness of the light in your life and in this broken world?

Focus on what is real and true for 40 days—

Invest in spreading hope.

Gravitate to the sources of God’s love

As the poet says—“Practice Resurrection”

Let this quotation from a rabbi in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century be the final word:

*No matter how low you may have fallen in your own self esteem*

*Bear in mind that if you delve deeply into yourself*

*You will find holiness there*

*A holy spark resides there which through repentance you may fan into a consuming flame*

*Which will burn away the dross of unholiness and unworthiness.*