

**Ash Wednesday - 2/5/08
St. David's
The Rev. Steve Keplinger**

It is unfair to lay this all at the feet of one man. But when we study church history, there is no way to avoid the fact that western religious thought to this very day is profoundly influenced by one African gentlemen in the fourth century. His name was Augustine. Augustine contributed thousands and thousands of pages to Christian thought. There is much in Augustine's theology that has spoken deeply to millions of people for 1600 years. But it was his understanding of humanity and sin that most affected what would become the orthodox teachings of the church. All humankind, said Augustine, is morally depraved. He referred to humans as a "condemned lump", and as such, "God must have condemned all." It is only by grace that God chose to elect a few of us for salvation. It is from this understanding of humanity as inherently evil, that Augustine would define the western concept of original sin. From this stemmed the idea that without baptism, all of us will burn in a never ending hell, even infants who never even had the opportunity to sin.

Ash Wednesday and the entire season of Lent is saturated with

the theology of Augustine. Augustinian theology permeates our prayers this evening, most especially that opening collect when we acknowledged our wretchedness and prayed for contrite hearts, realizing that only penitent people have any possibility of having their numerous sins forgiven.

For those of us who grew up in a liturgical church, it is difficult to see Lent through any lenses other than Augustine's. Because of him, Lent has come to be a time of self discipline, fasting, constant repentance and scourging of ourselves for the myriad of things that we have done wrong.

If any of you therefore, approach tonight and the season we are entering with a little trepidation, well, let me first say that your feelings are well founded. I will admit to you right now that your Rector has not always had the most healthy approach to tonight and that I have most often entered into Ash Wednesday with an attitude of gloom and doom. In fact, I must also repent that, even tonight, it was all I could do to spit out that opening prayer. Those words trigger in me all of the deep feelings of angst I had as a child because of the theology of Augustine that was pounded into my head from the time I

was seven.

If the Augustinian theology of original sin and double predestination has assisted any of you in reaching the kingdom of God, I beg your forgiveness for what I am about to say. But what I have come to believe over the years is that on these two doctrines, Augustine had it totally and unequivocally wrong. I believe them to be two of the most harmful ideas ever perpetrated upon Christian people. I'm not sure I am yet over my personal battles with unhealthy guilt complexes and feelings of inferiority as a result of growing up in a culture of perpetual Lent. So scarred am I by the Lenten experiences of my childhood, that my first reaction to tonight is still to run, run as hard and as fast as I can in another direction.

But upon further review, it occurs to me that to throw out the entirety of Lent because of the ramblings of one guy in the fourth and fifth century who had to come up with a rationalization for why he could not control his own sexual appetite is just plain crazy. Lest we forget, let us also recall that fully half of the Christian church never bought into any of Augustine's moral depravity crap. The Eastern Orthodox tradition still has no such language in its Lenten practice,

and I am proud to say that on this issue, the Episcopal church sides with the Orthodox and abandons our western religious roots.

Rather than something to avoid like the plague, Lent therefore, has become something very different for me. Lent has become a quest, a quest to retrieve its true meaning, a quest to return this season to the meaning it had before our friend Augustine ever came on the scene.

The symbolic basis for this season is centered in two biblical narratives, the 40 years Israel spent in the desert after the Exodus and the 40 days spent by Jesus in the desert before he began his ministry. In reviewing these stories, we first acknowledge that the Israelites time searching for the promised land had nothing to do with the notion that they were worthless scum. It, in fact, had the exact opposite purpose. By freeing the Israelites from an inhuman slavery, Yahweh taught them that they were not worthless at all, but instead valuable people chosen by God. Their time in the wilderness was to help them come to terms with the fact that they were important and special in God's eyes and what they should do with their lives as a result of their special humanity.

In the case of Jesus, he certainly did not head off into the desert to ponder how worthless and sinful he was. He did not fast so he could punish himself for his sinful nature. He went there to figure out what he was to do with the rest of his life. He did it to discern his destiny.

Herein lies the basis for a healthy understanding of Lent and our model for living into this season. We do not fast and repent to remind ourselves that we are piles of excrement. We do it to strip away the excesses in our lives so that we can see that we too are very special in God's eyes. We simplify our lives so that we can see beyond the crap that we have surrounded ourselves with and realize what it is God is calling us to be or do.

Seen from the standpoint of Jesus and not Augustine, we begin to realize that Lent is not a drudgery or something to escape. It is, in fact, perhaps more critical today than in the early church. In this American culture that is so good at embracing excess and indulgence and encouraging us to over consume and bury ourselves in material goods, the ashes I will put on your head in a few moments are a wonderfully subversive counter-cultural act. We are telling the world,

enough already! It is time to stop and ponder the real meaning of life and to separate ourselves from all the garbage that blinds us from seeing it. It is time to stop living into the addictive behaviors encouraged by our culture and remove from our lives those things we are obsessing about.

If you are going to give something up this Lent, I encourage to do it not to prove you can, or to make yourself miserable, or to remind yourselves of just how pitiful you are, but instead to take away the thing that is blinding you from seeing God's purpose for your life.

The second meaning of Ash Wednesday that has also become totally obscured today, is how it links us with all of creation. The ashes that I will smudge on your head were made from the palms from last year's Palm Sunday service by Jody this morning. They are meant to remind us of our connection with every living thing on this planet, as well as connecting us with all those who came before. They are our reminder that we are not separate from the rest of creation, but part of it. They connect us with God who gave all of us life and to all of the community of earth that surrounds us. They are our reminder that this season is here to reconnect us with God, with the earth and with each

other.

Last, yes those ashes are to remind us that, like all living things, we too are going to die. That is the third major corrective that Ash Wednesday offers us. Our culture teaches us that death is to be avoided at all costs. We are sold products to keep us young forever. We hide death and make believe it doesn't really exist to the point that when each of us has to face our death or someone's death near to us, we have no mechanisms for dealing with it. One of the most important things Christianity has to offer American culture is acceptance of death as part of the natural process. The most profound moments of my life have been the opportunities I have had to be with someone in their last moments. Ash Wednesday is here to remind us that death is part of the cycle of life and is something we must think about. If we do not think about our own mortality, our lives will be frittered away as we wait for tomorrow to rejoice, to live, to accomplish what God has in mind for us.

Movie clip

It is true. We can live into God's call for our lives. But to do so we need Ash Wednesday. We need Lent. We need to come to terms

right here and right now with the fact that life is short and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel the way with us. So when I place those ashes on your forehead, take those two words to the depth of your soul. Carpe diem! Seize the day...and go make your life extraordinary. Amen.