

# Ash Wednesday 2019

March 6, 2019

Pastor Tom Ford

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church

Pasadena, California

## Isaiah 58:

[6] "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

[7] 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 him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

[8] Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

[9] Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, Here I am."If you take away from the midst of you the yoke, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,

[10] if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday.

[11] And the LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your desire with good things, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.

[12] And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in.

## Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

[1] "Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

[2] "Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

[3] But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,

[4] so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

[5] "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

[6] But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

[16] "And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their

Interim Pastor Tom Ford



Hill Ave Grace  
Lutheran Church



Centennial Celebration 1919-2019

fasting may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. [17] But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face,  
[18] that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.  
[19] "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal,  
[20] but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.  
[21] For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

One Ash Wednesday, congregants at Kilbourne (Ohio) United Methodist Church were coming forward for the imposition of ashes on their foreheads. Two-year-old Brenna Wagoner, upset that her mother was not taking her to the altar, was overheard exclaiming: "But I want to get a tattoo just like Daddy's!"

Now, I know you haven't come just for your tattoo, but to begin this year's Lenten journey. Lent, of course, comes from an old word which means "to lengthen". It refers to this time of the year when the days are getting longer and spring is approaching.

In the Church, we have seasons, just as in nature. In the season of Lent we look more earnestly and closely for ways to follow Our Lord's teaching and example and his life of self-giving service and self-sacrificial love.

You see, spiritually, we are on a journey. It is a retracing of Our Lord's journey to the Cross. And, with no short cuts. And, as our First Lesson and Gospel for tonight exhort us, with the highest priority for justice for the oppressed, bread for the poor, our own homes for the homeless, clothing for the naked, and with no public overt displays of piety and, with all of our priorities in proper order, especially as they relate to possessions.

Living the Christian life is not easy. It was never easy for Jesus. It is never easy for anyone who would follow him. In fact, it is guaranteed to be difficult, frustrating, exhausting, at times, discouraging, and always, always fraught with obstacles and opposition.

The German Lutheran Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was hanged by the Nazis for his involvement in the plot to assassinate Hitler, said that to be a Christian means to participate in the sufferings of God at the hands of a godless world.

The sufferings of God. To participate in them. What does this mean?

**Interim Pastor Tom Ford**



Listen to a taste of his thoughts from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "Letters and Papers From Prison" (Collins Fontana Books; London:1953) pp. 122 -125, written while he was in a Nazi prison in 1944:

\*\*\*\*\*

July 18th 1944

. . . To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to cultivate some particular form of asceticism (as a sinner, a penitent or a saint), but to be a [person]. It is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world. . . . It is not in the first instance bothering about one's own needs, problems, sins, and fears, but allowing oneself to be caught up in the way of Christ . . . Faith is always something whole involving the whole life. . . .

July 21st 1944

... I discovered and am still discovering up to this very moment that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to believe. One must attempt to abandon every attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, a churchman . . . a righteous man or an unrighteous one, a sick man or a healthy one. This is what I mean by worldliness - taking life in one's stride, with all its duties and problems, its successes and failures, its experiences and helplessness. It is in such a life that we throw ourselves into the arms of God and participate in his sufferings in the world and watch with Christ in Gethsemane.

.....May God in his mercy lead us through these times. But above all may he lead us to himself!

\*\*\*\*\*

Now, it's obvious you and I are not likely to be imprisoned today for our faith. So, how do we participate in the sufferings of God? This wasn't something Bonhoeffer came up with himself. It is in the New Testament itself, in the book of 1 Peter:

#### **1 Peter: 4**

[12] Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you.

[13] But rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

[14] If you are reproached for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

[15] But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or a thief, or a wrongdoer, or a mischief-maker; [16] yet if one suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but under that name let him glorify God.

**Interim Pastor Tom Ford**



**Hill Ave Grace**  
Lutheran Church



[17] For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?

[18] And "If the righteous man is scarcely saved, where will the impious and sinner appear?"

[19] Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will do right and entrust their souls to a faithful Creator.

### **1 Peter: 5**

[6] Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that in due time he may exalt you.

[7] Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you.

[8] Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

[9] Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experience of suffering is required of your brotherhood throughout the world.

[10] And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish, and strengthen you.

We participate today in the sufferings of God and his Christ as we get into the trenches with the poor and the homeless and the abused, get to know them as people, talk with them, listen to them and provide them direct aid and assistance and lobby and work intentionally on their behalf and with them for a more just and equitable society. And receive the inevitable scorn from people who judge the poor and homeless and label them as no-good lazy trash, and who take every opportunity to put them down and anyone who would be sucker enough to help them.

We participate today in the sufferings of God and his Christ as we go to places where terror or tragedy unleashes its fury and indiscriminately kills and maims and as we reach out to its victims and serve and minister to them. Be it Alabama, Parkland High School, or Iraq or Afghanistan or Syria. And for however long it takes.

We participate today in the sufferings of God when we go to a young woman who is 18 and a lesbian and who has just tried to kill herself because she has been told repeatedly that God hates her because she is a lesbian and that she is destined for hell – as we go to her and tell her that God loves her and that she is not going to hell. And that we love her too and will do everything we can to help her.

Elizabeth Dreyer has written beautifully about the relationship of Christianity and suffering. She says: "To the question, 'What does Christianity have to say to the experience of human suffering?' we conclude simply – first that the Christian God is one who takes human suffering seriously and who personally enters into human suffering and transforms it from within; and second, that because of this

**Interim Pastor Tom Ford**



**Hill Ave Grace**  
Lutheran Church



Centennial Celebration 1919-2019

event, suffering can never be the final word about individual lives or about the end of history. . . Christians do not celebrate the suffering of Jesus but his love, expressed in his willingness to die rather than to live a life without mercy, compassion and forgiveness. Accepting and trusting in God's love, even to death on a cross, invites a perspective on suffering that includes both the mandate to work to alleviate suffering wherever we find it *and* the possibility of transformation coming from it. Christian faith invites the believer to allow suffering to bear fruit – courage, humility, compassion, love. Each generation of Christians must attend to human suffering and return to the cross to encounter the Crucified." [Elizabeth A. Dreyer, "Christian Perspective on Suffering", The American Catholic, March 2003.]

Remember, mortals, we are dust. Remember: Christ Our Lord suffered for you and still suffers today in the world in all those who suffer. Our Lenten call is to see his sufferings and participate in them. This is the only sacrifice God is willing to accept. Amen.

**Interim Pastor Tom Ford**



**Hill Ave Grace**  
Lutheran Church



Centennial Celebration 1919-2019