March 6, 2019

Springfield Presbyterian Church

Ash Wednesday Service – 7pm

Excuse My Dust

I. The Portable Dorothy Parker

As a teenager, I was gifted ‘The Portable Dorothy Parker” which is a collection of her poems, a portable 612 page book. Dorothy Parker was most notably a satirist and poet and a screenwriter known for her wit and - depending on who you ask – she had a dark view of the world, and it is fair to say, she did have a difficult life. Yet, I have not found her to be a pessimist writer, but rather an intelligent woman who put life into words that expressed realities without the quaint phrases of trying to make things sound better than they were or are. And a disclaimer, by the way – do not give this book to your teenager, maybe wait a while, Dorothy is not an easy read. Yet, this is where the sermon title came from – for she understood the real mortality of her life and ours, as her gravestone read, ‘Excuse my dust.’ She understood that life was finite, that she had a purpose, and just as she came from dust, so would she return.

As I was searching for more information about her gravestone online, I stumbled upon a song that Chris Rice, a Christian singer and songwriter, wrote entitled, “Pardon my dust.” I would like to share with you some of the lines of the song tonight:

“Pardon my dust, excuse the mess  
We're making somethin' new out of all of this  
I'm saying my prayers, and I'm trying to change  
So give me some time, 'cause I'm still finding my way

Pardon my dust, excuse the mess  
Please don't be another judge I need to try to impress  
Stop calling me names, stop casting your stones  
Let the good Lord sort this all out when we are all at home”

II. The Ashes Remind Us

This dust, this ash, reminds us that we are finite beings in a finite world, created by an infinite God. Ash, in the days of ancient Israel was a sign of grief and penitence. In our Gospel reading from Matthew this evening, Jesus reminds us of this poignant truth: life is fleeting. Jesus speaks about the hypocrites who do all sorts of good acts in public and hold onto all their riches to show off, to let other people know that they are real followers of God. Yet, Jesus asks us to do the opposite – Jesus says that those folks have already received their reward – they’ve received the earthly reward of blessing and acknowledgment and praise. The true follower of Jesus doesn’t share the story of his or her great giving, they do not pray in public to show off, nor do they store up treasures and not share their wealth. Jesus’ people love, because Jesus loves them first – and that reminder is clear tonight – we are called to serve Christ not for the applause, but simply and truly out of the love, grace, and abundance God has given us in this mortal life.

III. Where to go from these ashes

It seems strange then, after sharing with you, that you are told to praise God in secret, and yet you are marked tonight by ash on your forehead. Yet, tonight begins the story, a tangible sign on your forehead, marking you for these next days in Lent as we journey through the last days of Jesus’ life. Ultimately, when you go to sleep tonight, you’ll wash your face and the ash washes off, but the reality of what they symbolize – the very acknowledgment that as finite beings we are called to praise Jesus’ life and resurrection – that cannot be washed off. Ash may fade, but your purpose does not, dust may be swept to the corner, but the reality remains, as uncomfortable as it is – we are God’s, we will not be here forever, so let us do what we are called to do in the time we have together.

I think Chris Rice’s song, ‘Pardon My Dust’ says it well – we are on this journey and in the end, it is the Lord who will make something new of this – and of us – this Lenten season and beyond. **Amen.**