March 1, 2017
Ash Wednesday
Jl 2:12-18; Ps 51:3-4, 5-6ab, 12-13, 14 and 17; 2 Cor 5:20—6:2; Mt 6:1-6, 16-18

by Dawn M. Nothwehr, OSF, Ph.D.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” A Call to Solidarity
“Repent and believe in the Gospel.” A Call to hope-filled action.

Today we leave behind “Ordinary Time” in the Church’s Liturgical Year, and begin the Season of Lent. The past several months have no doubt been among the most tumultuous in recent years. Indeed, many would argue that we are living in a “Dark moment in history” – a world that is more divided than ever – in recent decades. Yes – the last three months since the US election have been far from ordinary!

Common wisdom suggests that “It take two to tango” – so the point here is not to cast blame, but rather to reflect on what it means to hear the words that will accompany our being signed with ashes on the sacred day. What does it mean in a deeply divided country and world to “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return”? What difference will it make in my live and yours if you and I “Repent and believe in the Gospel”?

A story is told of a man, who while driving a car met with a terrible accident. A few people soon gathered at the place of the accident and came forward to offer him immediate help that he needed. But the man said, “Oh! There’s nothing wrong with me.”
“But sir, you’ve just been in a terrible car accident. You’re bleeding and have some deep bruises. There may be internal damage!” someone from the crowd said.
But the man said again, “There’s nothing wrong with me!”
Another man then suggested, “At least have a doctor check you out, sir. We have an ambulance right here – it wouldn’t take very long.”
But the man again insisted, “I told you, there’s nothing wrong with me!” And he walked away from the car accident.
After this, his wife, when she heard of her husband’s accident, came there, picked him up and drove him home. Later, he died from internal bleeding.

Such is the risk of “going it alone,” of ignoring what is blatantly evidence of something drastically wrong and contrary to our well-being.

The prophet Joel cautions us that sin and division is a communal affair. No human being can thrive in isolation. From conception to our natural death – we, indeed the very elements that compose our bodies – are interdepended with other people and the entire created world. Who we are and what we learn to be good and true, and how we act, is heavily influenced by family, friends, where we go, and what media we expose ourselves to – and more. It is through all of this that our values and vision of the world and other people is shaped and solidified. Thus, Joel reminds Israel - and us - that though were each person in their own way in need of repentance, God is not pleased with divided hearts and sinfulness.
What is it that is dividing us? What is going on within each of us that keeps us from living and loving as God requires? Where is our capacity for mercy, justice, hope, solidarity with others... especially those “Others” of a different race, gender, sexual orientation, political party, economic status ....or ....?

Brothers and sisters... and indeed we are ALL brothers and sisters... if we are to ever become reconciled – as St. Paul pleads we must – each one of us needs to get serious and very practical about finding ways to come together around the kind of grace, mercy, and peace that our God extends to us. The model is none other than Jesus Christ.

In the Gospel of Matthew we see one who calls us to humility and generosity – to remember who we are as Christians who put trust in knowing whose we are. Our generosity needs to be extended to not only the economically poor and oppressed – but more importantly in these divided times – to the poor one deep inside of us – in our fearful hearts. Standing in fearful isolation in our communities and in the world is not our calling. Rather, we are to be witnesses and ambassadors for Christ, sacrificially giving of ourselves to unite, support, include, communicate, care – and more. Yes – there are some practical things each one of us can learn to do differently. Here are some resources that you can use for your Lenten practice [See the attached file of ideas from the 8th Day Center, Centerings (Winter 2017)].

Working together, then,
we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.
For he says:
In an acceptable time I heard you,
and on the day of salvation I helped you.
Behold, now is a very acceptable time;
behold, now is the day of salvation. 2 Cor. 6: 1-2

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” We are called to solidarity. “Repent and believe in the Gospel.” We are called to hope-filled action. If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.


Dawn M. Nothwehr, OSF, Ph.D., teaches at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago