

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church, Petersburg, VA
Ash Wednesday, March 1, 2017
The Rev. Bill Queen
“Trash Wednesday”

ashes in Biblical times had a big symbolic importance; remember Nineveh responding to Jonah’s preaching with the sackcloth and ashes of penitence; that pleased God, and God spared the city

ashes were formerly far more prevalent in our society, with fireplaces as the primary heat, or wood cook stoves, and with coal as the primary industrial fuel; back then, the disposal of ashes was a daily chore; and ashes were visible in the landscape all over the place in ash bins, ash heaps, ash pits, and ash fields; recall *The Great Gatsby*’s “valley of ashes” which symbolized the moral and social decay of the wealthy, as well as the wasted lives of the poor who were forced to live about it; even in Virginia, where tobacco once was king; it’s hard to find even an ashtray anymore; many fireplaces now use gas logs; barbecue grills have largely gone to gas

perhaps if you’ve attended a funeral recently, you would have heard the “ashes to ashes, dust to dust” reminder of our mortality; except for that, though, I wonder, with such a reduced exposure to ashes these days, even as we place a cross of ashes on our foreheads today, if ashes carry much significance for us?

so I began to wonder if there was something around us today that might be seen as comparable and would give us a more usable metaphor; well, how about something that sounds like ash--trash?; it has to be carried out of our homes regularly; we see it on roadsides and in dumps; (have you ever seen the former landfill turned into a park and playground area in Virginia Beach called Mount Trashmore?); trash is a political issue as states and countries try to offload their trash barges onto other areas; and of course, trash smells bad; perhaps then, we might think of today as, in addition to Ash Wednesday, Trash Wednesday

so, thinking about trash, what might we identify in our physical, moral, or spiritual lives as ‘trash’?; something smelly, unneeded, or unwanted?; something we’d rather not have other people see?; something needing to be taken out of our lives?; I seriously doubt any one of us, me included, is without any trash in our lives; maybe we are aware of it already, so what our trash is might be obvious to us; or

maybe others have done us a big favor and already pointed out our trash to us; or maybe we need to look around and find out what it is; if so, how might we go about identifying our trash?

following this sermon, the imposition of ashes, and Psalm 51, we will pray together the “Litany of Penitence”; it is a type of general confession, yet one which specifically names different kinds of trash more than our usual Sunday general confessions do that we have in either Morning Prayer or Holy Eucharist; another way to look at the Litany is as ‘an examination of conscience’; this is one form of an ancient tool used by spiritual directors; but it is one which you can also use by yourself

what we can do is to read, think, meditate, and pray very carefully through the Litany, using it as a checklist; as you go through it you might identify some things that will show themselves immediately, without ambiguity, as trash needing to be taken out of your life; or perhaps you’ll need to spend time to reflect on it more thoroughly in order to discover any trash you weren’t already aware of

for example, “we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves”; make this personal by changing it to the 1st person and stating it in the form of a question: “Have I, or have I not loved my neighbors as myself?”; then ask yourself how? when? why?; or again, “We have not forgiven others”; change to 1st person and into a question: “Have I, or have I not forgiven others?”; again, how? when? why?; or again, “We have been deaf to your call to serve, as Christ served us”; change to 1st person and into a question: “Have I, or have I not been deaf to your call to serve, as Christ served us?”; again, how? when? why?; and so on for each of the statements; the answers to those questions might reveal the extent of and the smelliness of our trash

try to get a sense of what this might entail as we recite it today; yet, recognize, that no one can give this the time and attention it merits during our service, so I’d recommend you do it again at home; (as long as you have a prayer book; if not, an internet search for “*Book of Common Prayer* online” will give you access; and you have the page number there in your bulletin, page 267); what you might discover about yourself from this examination of conscience will allow you to identify the worst of the trash and use this time of Lent to work at removing it—permanently if you can—from your life; and this is not necessarily a one-time activity, but one to be repeated throughout one’s life, as the trash accumulates or changes in nature over the years

my prayer for all of us is that we may locate the worst of our trash and be successful in removing it; and from a successful experience of doing an examination of conscience, then establish a commitment to redo it, or something like it, regularly; taking out our trash does lead to a better physical, moral, and spiritual life; and we'll be more ready to welcome the risen Christ anew into our lives, at the end of Lent, come Easter