

YOUTH MINISTRY REFLECTIONS

Burning Ashes: joy in the sacred and the ordinary

By: Rev. Dr. Matt Weiler

On the Sunday evening before Ash Wednesday the youth group gathered in the parking lot outside the church breaking from our typical comfort of the downstairs Youth Lounge couches and meeting instead, around a bonfire. Our purpose for the outdoor meeting was to burn last year's Palm Branches, stored away and dried out in my office for the past 10 months, readied to be transformed into Ashes. Almost two decades of youth ministry in various forms should have prepared me by now for the inevitable chaos in spaces once imagined as deeply contemplative. In fairness, the use of the word chaos is misleading. Youth tossing palm branches into a large pot and fanning it with the lid to keep the fire going while laughing hysterically is not chaotic, it's just joyful. Joy was present as we burned the palms to ash intended to remind us of our mortality.

It has been my practice for years to save palm branches and transform them into Wednesday's ashes for worship. It is, for me, a kind of eve to the Lenten season. And every year I imagine the process to be sacred and deeply reflective and yet it typically ends up happening while I'm preparing dinner for my family or in small bursts between dance class and piano lessons. Sometimes I burn ashes after dark while we are all at the dinner table eating, a large pot flaming on our porch in the snow sending a strange scent throughout the neighborhood. I imagine the neighbors at their own dinner tables,

"Hey what's that smell?"

"Oh that's just our pastor-neighbor burning palm branches again."

What I have come to learn is that life offers few moments of uninterrupted holy, sacred, or contemplative spaces. In reality, the sacred unfolds in the midst of the ordinary, blurring the line between the two. Over the years, as the blurred line has been formed by the ritual of burning ashes and switching the laundry, my own appreciation for Ash Wednesday as sacred day has evolved from strange curiosity to a longed for moment in the Christian year.

On Ash Wednesday we smudge our heads with ashes and listen to the ancient words, "From dust you are made and to dust you shall return. Repent and believe the gospel." Ashes are an ancient Christian symbol of repentance and a reminder of our human frailty. Their mark on our foreheads signify our commitments to (re)turning the fullness of our lives to Jesus Christ and surrendering to the truth that we will not live forever. And this, badly as we try to prolong our lives for as long as we possibly can, is good news. To know that this flesh has limits can indeed free us to live in the joy of the one who has called us beloved, in the one whose own death was redeemed in the resurrection we will celebrate on Easter Sunday. The ashes, intended to remind us of our mortality, also serve to remind us that in the messy and fragile journey we call life, joy is found when life is given meaning by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In the chaos of Sunday night youth group in the parking lot, joy was found in some silly games along with unlimited S'mores while palm branches were smoldering into sacred ashes in a green cooking pot from my basement. When bellies were fed, games were played, and the fire was steady, we did actually move into a contemplative place that night. Small groups were formed among sixth and seventh grade students, eighth grade students, and High School Students. We read about the moment of Jesus's baptism, when God said, "You are my son and with you I am

well pleased” and then we read the moment right after in the wilderness when the devil said, “Oh really, you think you’re the son of God?” We talked about temptation as anything that tries to convince us we are not God’s beloved. We talked about those things in life that do the convincing. We talked about what we can give up and what we can add during Lent that might help us remember we are loved, and like Jesus, are God’s beloved. The conversation was deep and contemplative. Sacred from chaos. When it was over we sat around the bonfire and sang songs in worship that reminded us of our belovedness, and how that love can hold us together.

We didn’t have time to burn through all of the palm branches that evening, so the next day while I hung laundry on the line I burned more palms in the green cooking pot on the other end of the yard behind the chicken coop. In that sacred ordinary space I contemplated what it means to talk to young people about the fragility of life. Every semester of their school year opens with active shooter drills and just that week students at MSU were killed by an active shooter. Our young people understand, or at least consider the fragility of life in ways I never did as a 14 year old. Between the laundry and the burning palm branches I prayed that their awareness would give way to freedom found in the cross of Jesus Christ – a freedom to be who God created them to be. I prayed that the 90 minutes we spent together the night before was a space to make meaning of it all, to find joy at the intersection of the sacred and the ordinary, and that this joy would be enough to bring them through the week, back together again in the comfort of those youth lounge couches next week.

-Rev. Dr. Matt Weiler – Pastor of Community Formation

Youth Ministry at FUMC meets every Sunday evening around the comfy couches in the youth lounge from 6pm-7:30pm and is open to all youth 6th-12th grade. Questions? Contact Pastor Matt Weiler – mweiler@umc-kzo.org