

Ash Wednesday 2017, March 1, 2017, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

Storage units and gym memberships. These are two images which come to my mind on this Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent.

I've been seeing a series of advertisements on television recently for a gym, or health club, as they are often called. They run these rather humorous commercials showing different ways we are judged by others while contrasting their gym as a "Judgment Free Zone." One commercial shows a woman at a pet store peering into a cage with a cute cat. There's a sign hanging in the cage that says, "For Sale." As she peers into the cage she says, "You're so adorable." The cat then reaches up and turns over the sign that now reads, "Sorry, not for sale." Another shows a classic "little old lady" standing at the street corner waiting to cross the street. A man comes along and takes her arm and says, "Can I help you cross the street?" She immediately turns and unloads a shot of pepper spray into his eyes. The tag line on these commercials is "The world judges, we don't." Now I'm not really that familiar with the culture of health clubs and gyms. Maybe judgment is a problem in some of them. I could see where someone, a bit more than overweight, might feel intimidated by the svelte, buff bodies of gym denizens. I belong to our local YMCA where I work out, not as regularly as I should, and I don't think there's a lot of judgment going on there. But I could be wrong.

Maybe we'd like to live in a judgment free world. Everyone does their own thing and as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else it's ok. But we quickly realize that judgment is all around us, and within us. We judge ourselves, we judge others. Maybe inside this particular gym there is no judgment, but I doubt even there it's not quite true.

Tonight is about judgment. We need to be honest about that. We take a look at ourselves and we realize how we have fallen short in so many ways. We list all the ways we miss the mark. The litany of repentance we'll recite in just a few moments attempts to be comprehensive. We have not loved God with a whole heart, we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves, we have not forgiven others, we are self-indulgent, neglectful in prayer, indifferent to suffering, judging others falsely. The list goes on and on. This is not the gym. This is not a judgment free zone. But thank God it's not. Acknowledging our sin honestly is always the first step towards freedom.

The second image that comes to mind tonight is storage units. As you know the house my parents lived in at Homestead Village needed to be closed. My mother, now living in skilled care, doesn't need the house anymore. During the month of January my brother and sisters and our spouses, and some of our children, cleaned out their house. Various pieces of furniture went to some family members, dishes, decorative items and kitchen utensils not needed were donated to Homestead's Tag Sale which benefits their charitable living fund, clothes donated to Community Aid the local thrift store, and other things unusable or damaged were sent to the landfill. Still, there were some items we didn't know what to do with. Some furniture we didn't want to donate, but no one could take at this time. So we rented one of those off site storage units you see scattered around the area. It's my first time renting such a unit. My house doesn't have a garage or an attic, though we do have a basement. Our own basement serves as a storage unit for

lots of things. Some of which Lois has already announced will be gone when she retires and goes through the house like a ravaging fire purging us of un-needed things.

Jesus says, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth." I think he's being both literal and figurative here. We know how easy it is to become possessed by our possessions. Everywhere around us we are reminded how much better our lives could be with this product or this new car or this new smartphone. Our temptation is to see our status in the eyes of our friends and our family dependent on our possessions.

But what of the possessions we cannot see or touch or hold, yet still work their way into our hearts and lives, cluttering up the possibilities of a relationship with God? These are qualities or characteristics that we often hold onto or cultivate. But they are corrosive of our humanity, and they rob us of that deep relationship God desires for us. I like what Pope Francis urged Christians to give up this Lent. This goes way beyond chocolate, or desserts, or that glass of wine. We should practice giving up or fasting from things like holding onto grudges and instead be reconciled; pessimism and instead be filled with hope; anger and instead be filled with patience; words that hurt and instead be filled with words that heal. Are these held in the storage units of your heart? Do you possess anger, or pessimism or fear? How much do they possess you?

Tonight many of us will receive a smear of ashes applied to our foreheads. They are a sober reminder that we stand under judgment, but it's a judgment we bring upon ourselves. We fill ourselves with all the wrong things, we neglect in seeing and loving the God who most often appears in the needs of our neighbor, we want what's going to make us look fine and righteous in the eyes of others. And it all results in a dead end. Literally. "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

That smear of ashes? It's in the shape of a cross. One of the most potent signs of what is really our only hope. For the dust reminds us of our mortality. And the cross points us to the God who joins us, here in our dust, our sin, under judgment. This journey we are on, this journey called life of which Lent is itself but a symbol, we do not walk alone. Jesus walks with us, ahead of us, and yes, even in our place.

So, "that judgment free zone," of which I spoke earlier? It's not in a gym. It's right here after all, at the foot of the cross. Jesus takes on all the world's judgment, all the ways in which we have conspired and contrived to keep our own storage units filled with everything that keeps us in charge, keeps us righteous in the eyes of others. Those storage units may now be emptied, purged of their clutter and filled now with heavenly and kingdom treasures. Amen.