

Centre Congregational Church, U.C.C.

Ash Wednesday

Service of the Ashes, 7:00pm

February 22, 2023

The Rev Dr Scott Couper

“From the Depths a New Beginning”

Hebrew Scripture: Psalm 51:1-17



The Franciscan

Catholic, Father Richard

Rohr, teaches is that there is no spiritual wisdom without paradox. Paradox is the holding together of two seeming opposites in tension at the same time.

I have had moments in my life where paradox was very real to me. I remember a night, a long time ago, when I cried at the kitchen table in a heap. I examined the hundreds of edits I had to make to my PhD dissertation. And they were not just 'edits'. Each item of additional work required many hours of work. I balled. I remember crying because I thought the task hopeless given the amount

of time I had to complete it. Yet, I walked on graduation day, I received the degree and the hood. I levitated.

I ran for 11 hours and 45 minutes. I never felt so horrible in my life. I was vomiting on all fours in the middle of the road. My wife and children contemplated calling an ambulance. Yet, when I picked-up my head, I had the biggest smile on my face. I never felt so much pride in an accomplishment. I levitated.

What experience have you had in your life when one extreme of pain and sorrow led, either later or at the same time, to a feeling of exhilaration, happiness, and completion? What experience have you had where the joy you experienced was made all the richer by the depth of the pain endured?

Psalm 51 is a psalm pregnant with paradox. The paradoxes are many. Yet, I will focus only on one, that of profound unworthiness and profound acceptance. This psalm is traditionally ascribed to King David as his prayer of repentance for committing treason, murder, adultery, greed, false witness, and everything else all in one as he had Bathsheba's husband killed so as to make way for what amounted to the theft of someone else's wife. In this psalm, David expressed extreme remorse and absolute confidence in God's love and mercy: two seemingly contradictory sentiments.

Ash Wednesday is a paradox as well. With the Imposition of Ashes, we recognize our mortality. Yet at the same time, we acknowledge that we are completely dependent on God who promises us eternal life.

Lent is a penitential and sobering season. Yet, Lent is all about “from the depths a new beginning”. The new beginning occurs on Easter morning with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And out of these paradoxes come the greatest of all paradoxes: the Cross, the sign and symbol of our faith.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.