

Ash Wednesday February 21, 2007

I have a story for you. This is a true story, I know because I made it up myself.

A long, long time ago in a land far, far away, there lived a man named Paul Prosperous. Paul Prosperous was a rich and prosperous man. In fact if you were ever introduced to him he would say, 'Hi I'm Paul Prosperous. I am a rich and prosperous man.'

Paul was also a really nice guy. He was rich and prosperous man but he didn't look down on those less prosperous; in fact he did a lot of charity work: habitat for humanity, food shelf, nursing home and on and on.

Paul had a prosperous family, three great kids and a wonderful wife. Things couldn't be going better for Paul. In fact if you would ask him, "Hey Paul, How's it going? He would say, "Things couldn't be going more prosperously.

Then as often happens in these kinds of stories, for no particular reason, "things" changed. Things weren't so good, in fact things were going poorly. Everything Paul Prosperous had going prosperously, started going, not so prosperously. They were going, poorly.

First Paul's business, Prosperous Industries began not being so prosperous. In fact if you asked him, Hey Paul how's your business going? He would tell you, "My company is not being so prosperous". In fact Prosperous Industries' stock fell through the floor, going from \$100 per share to 10 cents a share.

Paul felt poorly. He went home to his wife and children to be comforted. Paul arrived home, only to find a note from his wife, "Paul I saw on CNN that your company has gone down the drain. I guess we're broke. I'm sorry but I have to leave and I'm taking the kids with me." This pained Paul more than the millions he lost from his business because he loved his family more than anything else in the whole world. In fact if you asked him, Hey, Paul how are you feeling now that your wife and kids have left you. He would tell you, "I'll tell you this pains me more than the millions I lost from my business I love my family more than anything else in the whole world."

If this wasn't bad enough, all of this stress started to take its toll on him. In fact if you asked him, Hey, Paul how are you feeling? He would say, This stress is taking its toll on me."

It started affecting his good looks. O, I forgot to tell you Paul was a very good looking man. In fact if you were to ask anyone who knew him man or woman, Hey how does Paul Prosperous look? They would say "He is a very good looking man."

Due to his stress he broke out with boils all over his body, especially on his face. It was so bad that this once beautiful man now looked very ugly. In fact if you were to ask him, Hey Paul how do you look now? He would say, "I was once a beautiful man now I look very ugly."

The stress finally got the best of him, he not only had boils but his blood pressure went up and his heart couldn't take it anymore and he died. He just lay down and died.

When he woke up, he was in the presence of Jesus. Jesus didn't look like any of the pictures Paul had seen in his life but he just knew he was Jesus. In fact if you were to ask him, Hey Paul who did you see in heaven? Paul would say, "I saw Jesus, but he didn't look like any pictures of Jesus I had ever seen in my life. I just knew it was him."

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Jesus was shaking his head saying, it's such a shame, such a shame. Paul said, what's such a shame? Your life. O, said Paul, You mean my health failing like that? No. You mean my family leaving me like that? No. You mean my business going down into the toilet like that? No. WELL WHAT THEN?

Paul was so frustrated that he yelled but then quickly realized he was talking to Jesus. In fact if you were to ask him he would tell you, "I was was so frustrated that yelled but then I quickly realized I was talking to Jesus."

Sorry Jesus, he said. What's a shame? Well the whole chain of events is a shame. Paul said, Yeah, it was a shame that my business went then my family then my health and then I died.

No, Jesus said, I mean the mistake the reporter made was a shame. What mistake? The said your stock went from \$100 a share to 10 cents a share. That's right, Paul said. Well he read the

report wrong, your stock didn't go down to 10 cents it went up 10 percent. What? He made a mistake and everyone believed him and you know the rest.

And your wife. Well, that was very disappointing. I thought she loved me for me, not for my prosperity. She does, Jesus said. Paul said, but she wrote. "Your company has gone down the drain. I guess we're broke. I'm sorry but I have to leave and I'm taking the kids with me." That's right. But she didn't mean she was going to leave you leave you. She left you to go and get help from her family. In fact if you would ask her, Hey, where did you go? She would say. I went to get help from my family. But by the time she came back you had stressed your self out and died.

O, no! Paul screamed, O, no! He started screaming louder and louder. O, no! He screamed so loud, that he woke him self up.

He had really over done it at the Mardi Gra party at work. It must have been some bad Skippy peanut butter. It made him have a really bad dream.

It was a dream, only a dream and he realized it was only a dream but it really affected him. The dream made Paul Prosperous scared to death that he would lose everything his company & money, his wife and kids and his very life. It made him crazy with stress. And that made him worry that he would in fact die of stress. In fact if you would ask him he would tell you, I'm worried that I will die of stress.

His wife tried to get him to go to the Ash Wednesday Soup Supper but he won't go. Even though he loved the chili the youth made for their fundraiser for their summer mission trip. His wife did get him to go to the service. He loved the Holden Evening Prayer Service his church used during lent. But even the wonderful music didn't help. In fact if you would ask him he would tell you, "even the wonderful music didn't help."

It wasn't until he went up and received ashes. It was through the ashes that he was healed. He received the ashes on his forehead. Then he went up to the altar and knelt, even though they didn't have kneelers out. The kneelers were in a storage place somewhere else.

Paul just knelt there and cried. He cried tears of relief, tears of happiness, tears of joy. God used the ashes to help Paul realize that life wasn't all up to him. Life wasn't all about being

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prosperous. He appreciated those things especially his family but he realized life wasn't up to him. It wasn't up to him to keep it all together. He didn't need to be scared.

He was a child of God, God created him out of nothing, out of the dust, just like those ashes. He didn't have to trust his luck, or his skill or his hard work. He could trust God.

When Paul gave his faith story during the Lenten services where people of the congregation shared their faith and how God touched their lives as many congregations do, he talked about how God saved his life. Most people didn't understand. They thought Paul Prosperous had it all, a prosperous company, prosperous family, a wife and three kids.

Paul said those things were great but it was more important him to remember that he was dust, God's dust. He said there is something very freeing in realizing your God's dust, God's ashes. In fact if you asked him, that is what he'd say.

Amen.

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Ash Wednesday

by Rev. Arthur W. Sharot Jr.

Kaitlyn: I can't wait for Ash Wednesday.

Elise: I can.

Kaitlyn: Don't you know we are going to get ashes on our heads?

Elise: I know.

Kaitlyn: Don't you know we are reminded that we are like ashes – human?

Elise: I know.

Kaitlyn: Then what's your problem?

Elise: I don't have a problem.

Kaitlyn: Afraid of a little dirt?

Elise: No, I'm not afraid of a little dirt? I'm afraid of a little death.

Kaitlyn: Death?

Elise: It reminds me that I'm going to die

Kaitlyn: We're all going to die!

Elise: I know we're all going to die.

Kaitlyn: So what's your problem?

Elise: Thinking of death makes me scared.

Kaitlyn: It makes everyone scared.

Elise: So why do you like having ashes put on your head if it will remind you of death?

Kaitlyn: I.

Elise: Or are you one of those people who like those horror movies?

Kaitlyn: I.

Elise: You a big Steven King fan.

Kaitlyn: I.

Elise: You like to be scared.

Kaitlyn: No but I am afraid you will never let me answer your question.

Elise: Go ahead.

Kaitlyn: Ashes on my head does make me remember that I am going to die. That I am not a god. I am mortal. It does scare me sometimes.

Elise: See?

Kaitlyn: But the ashes remind me of my need for God, who is immortal. It helps me to remember that with Jesus I don't need to fear death. It reminds me that while I am but ashes and while I am weak, God is strong.

Elise: Good for you.

Kaitlyn: Good for me and good for you.

Elise: Me.

Kaitlyn: My God your God, our God is strong.

Elise: My God.

Kaitlyn: The God who loved the world enough to send his son to die for the sake of all the people of the world. Ashes remind me that I am strong in Christ.

Elise: I guess that's not so bad.

Kaitlyn: So you gonna get ashes?

Elise: No way.

Kaitlyn: Why not? You still afraid?

Elise: Yes.

Kaitlyn: Really?

Elise: Yeah. I'm afraid I'm gonna get all dirty.

Kaitlyn: What?

Elise: Just kidding, I'm getting ashes.

Kaitlyn: Ok.

Elise: You kids gonna get ashes?

Kaitlyn: Ok see yah. Bye

Elise: Bye.