

Title: Wurstessen
Date: February 17, 2010
Texts: Gen 3:19, Isaiah 58:1-12

March 9th, 1522. Zurich, Switzerland. It was the middle of Lent. About twelve people got together at the house of Christopher Froschauer and had a feast of sausage. Eating sausage during Lent was strictly forbidden by the church, and back then church laws were the laws of the land. If you didn't obey the church, then a police officer (or magistrate) would show up at your door and take you away for punishment. But they ate the sausage and defiantly broke the mandated Lenten fast. The event would be known as the "Wurstessen"—the sausage eating. It was a protest, an act of civil and ecclesial disobedience. Among this sausage-eating group were some of the same people who, three years later in 1525, performed the first re-baptisms. They became the Anabaptists, who later became the Swiss Mennonites. So, we can follow some of the roots of our church to a Lenten protest of sausage eating.¹ If that's the case, why in the world do we care about Lent? Isn't it strange that we're gathered here, at a Mennonite Ash Wednesday service, to begin a season of Lent? Shouldn't we be eating sausage?

Part of what was going on for those sausage eaters was an attempt to throw off a system of piety—a system that let people satisfy themselves with personal piety without seeking real change, true change, lasting change in the church and in society. So, this system of piety, sanctioned by the church and the state, kept the faithful preoccupied with what they should and shouldn't eat during Lent, instead of worrying about the corruptions in the church. The Lenten fast from meat, among other church practices, gave the people something to do to feel like they were pleasing God, instead of finding ways to transform their lives and church and society into the kingdom of God. What I find most compelling about the Anabaptism of the Mennonite church, of our church, is that we believe that God is at work transforming everything—all of us, all our lives, and the whole world. And all of us are the agents of that transformation. God has empowered ordinary people to bring the kingdom of God. This also means that there are no spaces in our lives that are off limits to God's work of renewal and reformation. Jesus is Lord of all, and his new life is flowing through all that we are, transforming us, reforming us, forming us anew.

With God, this is the way it has always been. God has always been in the business of reforming, of forming anew. That's what we remember on Ash Wednesday. We remember that God formed us from the dust, the dirt, the earth. We mark our foreheads with ashes, the dust of the earth, and read a verse from Genesis 3:19: "you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return." *Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.* At some point we all started as dust from the earth, as tiny bits and pieces of matter. Our bodies come from dust. And at some point our bodies will decompose; we will return to the dust. Yet the mystery is that God is at work in

¹ C. Arnold Snyder, "The Birth and Evolution of Swiss Anabaptism, 1520-1530," *MQR* 80.4 (Oct 2006), 505-507. Cf. Robert C. Walton, *Zwingli's Theocracy* (University of Toronto Press, 1967), chapter 5: "The First Outbreaks of 'Radicalism'."

all of it. God forms us and continues to reform us until we return to the dust—and then we are transformed into something wonderfully new through resurrection. In the meantime, we give our lives to the graceful movement of God’s re-formation of the world. If God can form such wonderful creatures, human beings, from the dust of the earth, then there are no limits to what God can create in our midst, with our lives. Our lives are formations of dust, molded together with the hands of God, to be gifts of good news for the world.

Lent isn’t only a time to make personal sacrifices of piety for a month and a half, and then go back to the ways things have always been. That’s why those early Anabaptists protested Lent by eating sausage. Instead, Lent is a time to come to rediscover that we are nothing but formations of earth, of dust—yet beloved nonetheless, beloved no matter how pious we try to be, and beloved no matter how much we fail. We are dust that can do nothing to make our lives more secure, other than rest into God’s love for us. Lent is a season where we reflect on the miracle of our being, the wonders of being a human being—made from dust, yet made to be loved by God. God loves dirt, mounds of dirt he formed into our bodies. We are infused with God’s love, and Lent is a time for us to consider all the ways we refuse to let that love flow through us and into our friends and neighbors and strangers and co-workers and whoever. What are the ways we restrict the flow of God’s love, the love that formed us and sustains us? Sin is simply the name we have for all those ways we refuse to love, all the ways we refuse to share the love that makes us human, the love that forms our lives from the dust, the love that is God.

Lent is a season for us to make space in our lives to listen—to listen for what God may be saying, to listen for the whispers of God’s love and to follow the movement of that love. Lent is a time to make lasting change in our lives—a time to let go of our sins, all those ways we refuse to be loved by God, and instead become transparent earthen vessels of God’s love for the world. Then, as the prophet Isaiah says, the glory of the Lord “shall break forth like the dawn” (Isa. 58:8) and we “shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.” (v. 11).