

## Reflection Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21 – ‘Out of the Ashes – New Life’

Ash Wednesday

March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2025

Before my husband and I moved to New York three years ago, we lived in California. The last church I served there was St. Matthew’s in San Francisco, aka ‘The German Church’. It was founded in 1895 by German immigrants and has primarily been a church for first generation German speaking immigrants ever since.

When I served there, only a fraction of the congregation’s members lived in San Francisco itself. People were spread out all over the wider San Francisco Bay Area. Today I want to tell the true story of Marianne, an elderly German woman, who lived in Santa Rosa, in the heart of Sonoma County wine country, about 55 miles to the north of San Francisco.

Her late husband had built the beautiful ranch style house she still lived in, and the garden was just amazing, with a variety of fruit trees and an extensive vegetable patch. I would visit her a few times a year and always leave with some gift of fruits or veggies, or both.

Then on October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017, the Tubbs Fire started near Calistoga, 17 miles to the east of Santa Rosa. It quickly spread westward, devouring vineyards, businesses, and houses and even a couple of fire stations in its path. If you followed the news about the recent devastating wildfires in the L.A. area and in the Carolinas, you know how quickly these fires can spread. The Tubbs fire in 2017 eventually reached the northern part of Santa Rosa east of highway 101, which bisects the town. People on the western side of the freeway were not too concerned – nobody expected the fire to jump a roadway six lanes wide.

But it did.

At about 5:30 a.m. on October 9<sup>th</sup>, I received a text message from Marianne’s daughter. This text message simply said, ‘It’s all gone. Mom’s house is gone.’ Almost the entire neighborhood where Marianne lived was gone, devoured by fire in a matter of a few hours. Fortunately - and thanks be to God -, Marianne escaped with her life. But all that remained of the house were some foundations

and an old fridge from the 1960s which had been kept in the garage. I guess they built those right! One lone fig tree in the garden also miraculously survived the firestorm.

But basically all that remained was ashes.

Marianne found shelter with her daughter and son in law. When I visited her shortly after the devastating fire, I could tell how traumatized she was. This was not the first time in her life she had suffered such a devastating loss. As a young girl, she had to leave her home in Silesia, which then was the far eastern part of Germany, towards the end of WW II, when Soviet Forces advanced and occupied the region. As a refugee, she witnessed the bombing and ensuing firestorm in Dresden in February 1945 which killed 25,000 people, most of them war refugees. It is safe to say that the loss of her house in the Tubbs fire re-traumatized her.

She was telling me, how, during that fateful night of the wildfire, she woke up to the sound of embers hitting her bedroom window. The phone line was down, so she couldn't call anyone. She got her bathrobe on, and sat on her walker next to the front door, waiting for someone to come and evacuate her. But in the chaos of that night, evacuation crews failed to notice she was still there. And Marianne told me, quite matter-of-factly, 'I was sitting there and thought, well, I guess that's how I am going to die.'

Well, thanks to her children, she didn't. As they realized she had not been evacuated, her son, in true super hero fashion, jumped on his motor cycle, rode through the inferno behind the evacuation lines and convinced a crew of firefighters to go in and rescue his mom. She lived to tell the tale.

And she lived to remind me – and those around her - about the true treasures in life. First of all, life is the greatest treasure. You can rebuild a house, but you can't bring someone back from the dead.

Family, friends, people who care, people who help, community are a treasure no money in the world can buy. And I am wondering these days if that's why some ultra-rich and powerful people in this country and around the world do their worst to destroy community by telling lies that are meant to divide us – because they don't know what true community is. Friends, we have to resist the temptation to hate and be divided – and hang on to community for dear life.

But back to Marianne. Of course she was hit hard by the loss she had suffered. But it wasn't so much about the material things she had lost. She mostly grieved the destruction of things with immense sentimental value. She mourned the loss of her photo albums. The loss of her late husband's love letters. Keepsakes that reminded her of her parents, her grandparents – the old country. Things that helped her remember – remember those she loved and lost, remember precious times in her life.

Stuff doesn't make us rich. It is our relationships, our experiences, our precious memories. These are the things we can hold on to when everything around us falls apart, the things that remain at the end of the day. And of course there is God. Always.

In all her trauma and grief, Marianne never doubted for a moment that she was in God's hands as she had been all her life. And she felt grateful to God that some of the most precious things in life were not taken from her.

Why is it that we often need to be confronted with death – be it that we deal with a serious or even life-threatening illness or injury, be it that someone near and dear to us dies, be it that we witness death and suffering around us, or hear and see news about casualties of war, like right not in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, and so many other places in this world our news don't even report about – why is it that we often need to be confronted with death to be reminded of the true treasures in life, and where our heart should be at all times?

Another of the greatest gifts, the greatest treasures we are given, is hope. Even in times when we experience utter destruction and loss in our lives, and there is death all around us, there still is hope, and new life waiting to spring forth.

When officials declared it was safe to re-enter the neighborhood that had burnt down, Marianne's family sifted through the ashes, trying to find anything that might have survived the fire. And they actually found a handful of bric-a-bracs, some of them miraculously unscathed.

But they also found a gold necklace with a cross pendant, which had been given to Marianne on the day of her confirmation. The box that held the necklace was half-melted, a few semi-precious stones that had adorned the cross had burst, but

the pendant, the cross itself, was intact. It was the only piece of Marianne's jewelry that survived.

That was nothing short of miraculous. I admit I tend to be skeptical about 'signs from God', especially the sentimental kind, but this made me choke. God is there, even in the midst of destruction and death. And nothing symbolizes that more than the cross itself.

But then another little miracle happened. When I visited Marianne and her family again the summer following the fire, I was given a basket of the sweetest cherry tomatoes. Marianne's daughter told me, 'These are our miracle tomatoes. They grew in the ashes of mom's house. The funny thing is: nobody planted those seeds. Somehow, some tomato seeds from some old plants must have survived the fire.'

And those seeds found fertile ground in the ashes. New life sprang forth from utter destruction.

And, just to finish the story: the family was able to rebuild the house. Since Marianne by then was not able to live on her own anymore, her daughter and son-in-law moved in with her in late 2020. Sadly, Marianne passed away a few months later. I was able to visit her just a few days before she died. And I could tell she was at peace. She was surrounded by the most precious treasures in her life. Her family. Her memories. She was surrounded by God, who had sustained her throughout her life through many a trial and tribulation.

In a few moments, we will receive the ashes as a sign of the finality of things, as a sign of our own mortality. But ashes are also a symbol of hope. New life awaits. These ashes remind us that God is with us always and leads us – from life to death – and to a new life, which is eternal. Amen