



**“Extremophiles”
Ash Wednesday message
Bishop Bruce R. Ough
Dakotas-Minnesota Area
The United Methodist Church**

I am Bishop Bruce Ough and I am pleased to greet you as we enter our 40-day Lenten journey to the cross and Jesus’ ultimate victory over sin and death on Easter morning.

The pattern of our Lenten journey was set by Jesus during his 40 days of solitude, fasting, prayer and testing in the Judean desert. This was an essential period of preparation for Jesus’ public ministry.

But, the goal of our Lenten journey was revealed by Jesus when he first foretold his disciples of his death and resurrection. Mark’s Gospel has Jesus saying: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” (*Mark 8:34-35*)

What does it mean to lose one’s life for the sake of the gospel? It means to live the same purposeful life Jesus lived. It means to deny our preferences for the sake of Jesus’ kingdom purposes. It means to set aside our self-interest so that others may have a more abundant life. It means we are saved in order to participate in the salvation of others. It means our hearts will break for the very situations that break the heart of God. It means we are to become an extremophile.

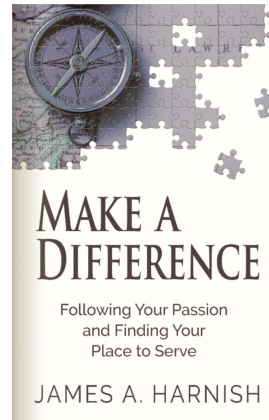
The word extremophile literally means “extreme – lovers.” Extremophiles are micro-organisms that thrive in extreme conditions such as hot springs, polar ice caps, salty lakes and acidic fields. I was surprised, on a trip to Alaska years ago, to learn that the glaciers I saw – towering sheets of solid ice – were home to several of these extremophiles, these organisms that love the extremes.

I don’t know if there is anything more extreme than to deny oneself, take up one’s cross, follow Jesus to Calvary, and lay down one’s life for others.

You see, the journey we are on with Jesus during these 40 days is one of learning how to become an extreme disciple –

- extremely compassionate,
- extremely humble,
- extremely forgiving,
- extremely patient,
- extremely faithful,
- extremely loving,
- extremely just,
- extremely courageous,
- extremely generous,
- extremely fruitful,
- extremely purposeful,
- extremely joyful.

Extreme disciples do not make their witness through extreme ultimatums about extreme positions. They join with Jesus in his extreme mission of redeeming all of creation.



James Harnish builds his book, titled, *Make a Difference: Following Your Passion and Finding Your Place to Serve*, or one fundamental question he borrows from the poet, Mary Oliver: “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

I think this is essentially the same challenge Jesus issued to his disciples and the crowds that began to follow him when he asked: “What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, lose your soul, lose the real you?” (*Mark 8:36*)

To lose one’s life for the sake of the gospel is to discover and embrace and live and witness to the real you – the you created in God’s image and called out of darkness to become an extreme disciple, an extreme lover – a holy and living sacrifice that others may have abundant life. What could be more surprising – more extreme – to a world yearning for redemption and wholeness?

I pray for you a rich and blessed Lenten journey – a journey in which the Holy Spirit awakens within you a profound longing to offer your one wild and precious life for the sake of the gospel. May it be so!