

Ash Wednesday Sermon
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During the Great Depression of the 1930's, there were many folks who had no work and no food. They traveled about looking for work and, when they couldn't find it, they asked for a little food. My mother told me this story about my grandmother:

My grandmother lived on a road just outside of town. Hungry folks walked along the road and sometimes knocked on her door and asked for food. My grandmother gave it to them. As time passed, more and more people stopped and asked for food. My grandmother cooked extra food and baked extra bread. Sometimes she baked pie or cake. She cooked and gave food to strangers who knocked on her door. My grandmother marveled at how many came asking. She began to take a special pride in her cooking and in how many came to eat. Those to whom she gave food thanked her heartily and complimented her cooking and this she appreciated.... *very* much. My grandmother began to believe that feeding hungry folks was all about her.

Jesus tells us in the gospel we are not to practice our piety *before others*. This doesn't mean that we are to *hide* our good works from others. Our good works bear witness to who we are as Jesus' followers.

The hypocrisy of which Jesus warns is the doing of good works in order to gain some reward or benefit from those around us. It is *God's* reward for which we labor.

Jesus is warning us about our *motives*. Our motives, more often than not, are mixed. We love God and we do his work with joy. But this joy sits alongside our need for control, our need to be seen, rewarded, respected or praised. How could it be otherwise? Sin is part of us.

One day, a hungry man came to my grandmother's door. He asked for food and let slip a secret: My grandmother's house had the hobo's mark. No more than tiny circle hidden on the fencepost, it was a sign known to the itinerants. The sign, a small circle, meant 'Good for a handout.' This was a comeuppance for my grandmother. She had thought it was all about her. My mother told me that my grandmother was at first chagrined, but then told this story and laughed about it for years after. And she kept on cooking ~ joyfully and thankfully ~ for those who were hungry.

We can never know who puts the 'Good for a handout' mark on our fencepost. Maybe a hobo. Maybe an angel. Enjoy it and know it's not all about you.

Here's Grandma's recipe to feed the hungry in four, easy steps:

Step 1: No trumpets.

Step 2: Feed the hungry.

Step 3: *Very important:* Give thanks to God!

Step 4: Repeat first three steps until the hungry are fed.

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The Collect today asks that God will "Create and make in us new and contrite hearts." I *need* a new and contrite heart.

I fall under the spell of my own indispensability. I am prideful when I sense pleasure or satisfaction from what I think of as my *own* achievements. If someone says, "Well done," I am sometimes too quick to think they're talking about me! Most things have precious little to do with me, but I can easily lose sight of that.

There was too little time, it seems, in the year gone by, for me to tend to my old, prideful heart. That is why I like ashes. Ashes work on my heart, starting the Lenten process that will, with work and prayer, convert my heart from old and prideful to new and contrite.

Ashes are my antidote. Ashes are the beginning of a fix for my thinking that it's about me. My heart understands ashes in a way that my brain cannot. Ashes are brutal and stark. My heart gets that in a way that my brain never will.

Ashes have great power. We hear of this power in different places:

There once was a beautiful young woman who, sadly, had become the slave of her loathsome stepsisters. The young woman had to do all the housework and she had to wait upon her stepsisters hand and foot. The young woman was terribly unhappy but she bore her fate stoically, never complaining. She knew that her time would come and that a great and wonderful change would come upon her. She wore rags while she helped her stepsisters dress for the great ball where royalty would dance. That night, while her sisters went to dance with the prince, the young woman took to her fireside bed and fell asleep by the ashes of the hearth. From these ashes ~ from these cinders ~ she takes her name: Cinderella. That very night, everything changed.

Cinderella is a fairytale, but there is a truth for us even in a fairytale: Things are not the same after the ashes. We need only let the ashes do their work.

Robert Bly, in his book [Iron John](#), details what he terms the 'descent into ashes.' He tells of cultures where young men mature by spending as much as a year sitting by the ashes of the fire pit. The ashes make the young men as if invisible. They sit by the ashes and listen. They hear the stories ~ the tales and histories and sacred stories ~ of the gathered community. One day, the young men rise from the ashes and take their place with the adults of the community. It is a rite of passage, birthed in ash.

Bly gives us a word ~ an old word ~ for the descent into ashes: katabasis. Bly sees katabasis as an essential and transformative rite of passage. In Bly's understanding, much change is brought about by ashes.

God sent Jonah to tell the king of Ninevah and all the Ninevites to repent of their evil ways or God would destroy them.

"[T]he king of Nineveh.... rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes."

[Jonah3:6] The king and the people and even the animals wore sackcloth and sat in the ashes. The king and the people and, apparently, even the animals, repented. God saw their new and contrite hearts. "....God changed his mind about the calamity that he said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it." [Jonah3:10b]

Our time with the ashes is brief. We do not wallow or tarry. Ashes are not the endpoint. Ashes are the beginning, elemental and unadorned, preparing our hearts to be made new in the wilderness that is Lent.

My heart knows exactly why I take the ashes: The ashes on my forehead and the words about dust remind me of the road that brought me to this moment. I am on the way to dying, resting for a few moments in the arms from which I came, and to which I will soon enough return.