

Ash Wednesday Homily 2011

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Ash Wednesday evokes some very powerful, negative feelings for people inside the Church. It also evokes some powerful reactions in people outside of the Church as well, but that is a result of their being unfamiliar and unknowledgeable about what Ash Wednesday signifies, well, that is, other than the arrival of Hot Cross Buns and pzacki doughnuts.

Have you experienced appearing in a public place with ashes on your foreheads and drawn some quizzical stares or even a gentle admonition from a nice person telling you that we have a smudge on your face?

And how many of us have been embarrassed by these responses, thereby missing an opportunity for a teaching moment about our faith, and demurely slunk off to the nearest restroom to wash up?

People inside the Church frequently tell me, "I don't do ashes?" And the proof of the pudding is in the pews or maybe better put, it's not in the pews. Ash Wednesday is hardly a high attendance day, with the numbers falling somewhere between Good Friday, (which suffers from a similar malaise as Ash Wednesday) and the low Sunday after Christmas, when people either believe they have filled their church attendance obligations for the season or are just too plumb tired to go to church yet one more time.

What invariably keeps people away on Ash Wednesday is the poignant reminder of our mortality – our frailty - which the ashes placed on our foreheads represent. The words of imposition, "remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return" are hardly heard as uplifting ones in a society that is in deep denial about aging and death. Death is a bummer for most people.

The truth is this death message that many people associate with Ash Wednesday is skewed, if not down right wrong. While it is undeniable that our liturgy today does speak to the frailty of our human flesh, the actual death it ends up addressing – the death with which it is most concerned - is the death of those behaviors that separate us from God.

Dying in this sense achieves what the psalmist speaks of today: "[God] forgives all [our] sins and heals all [our] infirmities. God redeems [our] lives from the grave and crowns [us] with mercy and loving kindness." (Ps. 103:3-4)

In the invitation to the observance to a holy Lent by Father Chris Weber which we will use today, the text emphasizes Lent as being "a season of renewal." This version reminds us that the Church calls us to a renewed life through a variety of spiritual practices. These practices of prayer, fasting, self-denial, reading and meditating on scripture are vehicles that put us into right relationship with God and our neighbor so that we might have the fullness

of life that God desires for us. The message of Lent therefore is not about death, it is about having real life.

Ten years ago was my first Lent as the rector of my own church. In the parish where I had previously served as curate we did not make our own ashes from old palm fronds, relying instead on pre-made ashes from an ecclesiastical supply house. So with all the fervor and gusto that only a newly minted priest who was flying solo for the first time, brings to the table, I was going to “do it right” and make my own ashes.

Not wanting to use the greasy bar-b-que grill the church owned to burn my palms, I found a heavy duty stainless steel pot from the parish hall kitchen that seemed suitable to the task. But prudence intervened. I knew that the ladies who maintained the kitchen would have my head on a platter if I ruined the pot by creating a small inferno in it. So, putting on my thinking cap, I decided to line the pot with some of the heavy-duty aluminum foil we had on hand. Necessity is the mother of invention, I smugly thought as I lit the fire in the pot and burned my palms.

Did you know that under high enough temperatures that aluminum foil flakes? I didn't until that day. And not only does it flake, it flakes into miniscule pieces; pieces that no matter how many times I pushed them through a fine sieve just would not come out of my ashes.

As my parish was in rural New Hampshire and the nearest Episcopal Church where I might borrow some pure ashes was about sixteen miles away, and it was Ash Wednesday when I decided to make the ashes, and I had a noontime service looming on the horizon, I had no choice other than to use my aluminum silver flecked ashes that day.

I cannot begin to articulate just what a unique experience that Ash Wednesday was for the congregation and me as I imposed those blackened ashes on people's foreheads with little silvery flakes of foil in them that glittered!

I can laugh about that incident now, but the reality is that there is a profound theological truth in those glittery, silver flecked ashes. Jesus said, “You are the light of the world . . . let your light so shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” (Mt. 5: 14, 16) Those flecks of aluminum foil were a poignant reminder of that light Jesus calls us to be.

Lent calls us to rid ourselves of those behaviors that mask our light; that prevent our light from brightly shining. Lent invites us to engage in practices that purge us of those things that bring darkness and death to human life. In doing this Lent births a renewed life in us allowing our light to shine and glitter as brightly as those little flecks of aluminum embedded in the ashes for all the world to see. What greater glory can we give God than that?

Amen.