

Ash Wednesday Meditation

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I don't know when the calendar of my life began to anchor itself to Ash Wednesday, but I think it was about ten years ago. That was the year my beloved cat, Jonah, died – or, rather, I had him killed – and I experienced, for the first time, the truly awful and complex nature of genuine, adult, altruistic love.

When you have complete responsibility for another living creature, and when you have loved that creature for years, and when that creature has become a part of the very fabric of your life, and when that creature has begun to suffer irreversibly, and when you know that the only path from that suffering is death – sooner or later – and when you know that you have the power to end that suffering sooner rather than later – then, I think, and perhaps only then, do we experience Love with a capital L, the kind of love that Eliot called “the unfamiliar Name / Behind the hands that wove / The intolerable shirt of flame” (Four Quartets).

We all have our own reasons for coming to this service. Some of us are paid to be here. Some of us come here because it's Ash Wednesday and you go get your smudge of ash on Ash Wednesday. Some of us are here because we're hoping that this service will open a window or a door in our lives that will allow a bit more meaning to come in.

That's what happened to me on Ash Wednesday the year that Jonah died – a bit more meaning came into my life, borne on the shoulders of the grief and the loss. Apart from dieting, it's hard to grasp how we gain when we lose, but that's the central teaching of Christianity and it's the central message of this service. We find our lives when we lose them, according to Jesus, and we find our lives through repentance – that is, from that turning from the self and the world toward God and God's realm. That is true repentance.

Jonah's death, and my role in it, broke the illusion that the happy life I'd managed to pull together for myself would last forever. That I would somehow be able to hang onto the most precious things in my life indefinitely. That I would be the exception to the rule of pain and loss. To have one's heart broken that way – the death of a loved one, the end of a marriage, the acknowledgment of an addiction – is to have a part of the illusion taken away, and what is left is a sacred space of honesty which is the natural home of the Holy Spirit.

There's nothing automatic about this. Grief is nothing more than an opportunity; it's not a guarantee of spiritual growth. To grow through the grace of sorrow requires surrendering our self-pitying sense of loss in empathy for the groaning of God's whole creation. We grow spiritually to the extent that we can feel the pain of others and act to soothe that pain in whatever ways God has prepared us to help. That is the movement from ourselves toward God which must, of necessity, lead us to others. That is repentance.

Conversion may be sudden – mine was – but repentance takes a lifetime. It may indeed be the case that we can be done quickly with some wrongdoings, but repentance is much more than simply avoiding or giving up this or that particular sin. The word repentance most likely comes from a Latin word meaning “nearly” or “almost,” and it signifies that sense of having missed the mark and the

desire to want to try again.

And what is that mark? It's the mark of true humanity that we find lived out in Jesus, whom we call the Christ. Any understanding of Jesus that recognizes his divinity at the expense of his humanity is a defective Christology. "Perfect God and perfect Human" is the way the Athanasian Creed put it many centuries ago. "Who, although being God and human, yet is not two but one Christ. One not by conversion of divinity into flesh, but rather by the assumption of the human into God."

That is our mark – Jesus the Christ who shows us how to be us by emptying ourselves of ourselves. We empty ourselves by loving God above all else and by loving our neighbor as we love ourselves. We gain ourselves by losing ourselves. That's the truth of the Christian faith, and that's the mark we miss continually.

And thus this service, which reminds us of both our continual need for repentance – taking aim, once again, with our whole lives toward the mark – and of the limited time we have to undertake that turning. Collectively, and at the outset of this service, we remind ourselves of our flawed condition; and then, having acknowledged our need to repent – to reorient our lives toward God – we receive ashes with the words that the dust which we receive is the dust that we are and the dust to which we will eventually return. Every one of us, sooner or later, without exception.

We do not have forever to turn, and it is possible to run out the clock and to die unrepentant – to die, that is, not angrily stamping our feet at God and insisting that we will not give up our pet sins, but rather to die having lived until the very end those "lives of quiet desperation" that we prefer to the abundant lives promised us by Jesus the Christ.

So I am grateful for this service, this annual reminder of both my hope and my need for it. I am not who God wishes me to be – that much I know – yet I have hope that I can be made better. That is not an unrealistic hope. It is possible to be changed. It starts by acknowledging our need for change, recognizing the limited time frame which we have to undertake that change, and then getting on with the daily business of letting God make us new.

This service reminds me that this is possible. This service gives me the opportunity to make new resolutions about old sins. This service is a chance to close the door on what didn't work or hasn't worked and to try something different. This is a service to launch a new year of a new me. This is my New Year's Day. Happy new year, everyone.