

## Ash Wednesday Meditation

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Ash Wednesday is the church's annual reminder to us of two fundamental truths.

The first is that we don't get life right – that we are people who need to confess our sins, in others words. And that's why we begin this service with that long confession of sin, the most important word of which is “we.” We confess our sins – the sins we have committed individually and the sins we have committed by being part of unjust groups – not only on our behalf, but also on behalf of those of whom we are a part. When the church prays, it never prays just for itself; we are also praying for those who do not or who cannot pray for themselves.

They may not know how to pray; they may not know that they should pray. They may not be aware of the facts about themselves about which they need to pray. They may not believe that it's worth their while to pray. They may be so lost that they are too confused or frightened to pray or have forgotten how to pray. When we pray for others, we are offering prayers on their behalf, including the prayers that they themselves would be making if they could and would. I suspect that not many of us realize that about our prayer life. Live with that reality for a bit this Lent.

The second great truth of which Ash Wednesday reminds us is that we don't have all the time in the world to get right those things that we know we're getting wrong. Our awareness of our impaired morality is accompanied by an even greater awareness of our biological mortality, and the church, early in its history, realized that the imposition of ashes in the form of a cross could remind us of both of those awarenesses simultaneously. We are dust, as Genesis reminds us, and we will return to dust. That's what the ashes are for. And the animated dust that we are while we live continually falls short of the glory of God as shown to us in Jesus Christ – that's the cross part. Ashes, in the form of a cross, remind us of those two fundamental truths at once, and as early perhaps as the second century, and certainly by the fifth century, the ashes of Ash Wednesday became a two-fer in the Christian tradition, and they have remained so for very many Christians for a very long time.

Now, whether we want to be reminded of these two somber facts about ourselves is another question, and I strongly suspect that the answer for most people is a resounding no. Even if we weren't in the midst of a winter storm, as we are tonight, I know from casting my eye over the attendance figures for this service that we won't need as many bulletins tonight as we'll need on Easter morning. We are a small group tonight, we'll be a bigger group then, and I know that what is true for us is true for every church: we are not eager to be reminded of our morality or our mortality, and to put both of those reminders together at the center of a worship service is practically to beg for poor attendance.

But the church is in the truth-telling business, and if there are two truths the

church can tell that are unquestionably beyond dispute, they are ours to embrace tonight: we do not get it right, and we do not have forever to get it right.

So the take-away from this service is not a morbid delight in sin and death – a spiritual version, if you will, of poking your tongue into a rotted tooth – but rather it is to get on with the business for which we were created, which is to live in God's image and likeness for as long as we bear it in this life.

Biologists and psychologists tell us that we are the only living creatures aware of our own mortality. A healthy polar bear is not aware that it is eventually going to die. And the awareness of our mortality has a purpose, which is to give both meaning and urgency to now, because we know, as a polar bear does not, that we have a limited supply of now.

And people who are spiritually awake, and not sleepwalking through their limited supply of now, will regard every single one of those limited moments of now as if it were our most precious resource, because that's exactly what it is. As precious as clean air, water, and soil are, they do not compare with now, which is the resource that enables us to make use of all the others, for better or for worse. In this life, when you run out of now, having a whole lot of everything else doesn't really matter.

And I think that's what Jesus was trying to tell us when he told us a story about a successful entrepreneur whose business did so well he expanded and retired early. This is the way Jesus put it:

“The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, “What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?” Then he said, “I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”

In other words, this hard-working fellow had spent his supply of now building up his successful business – and all farms are businesses – and he retired early, thinking, as the vast majority of us do, that his share of now would never run out.

“But God said to him” -- Jesus went on -- “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”

Just after his retirement party, this successful man dropped dead. And Jesus didn't call him unfortunate; quoting God, he called him a fool. That was Jesus showing us – because the parable is, after all, for us – some tough love.

Ash Wednesday is a service of tough love. It's tough to be reminded that we constantly miss the mark of living as God's image on earth, and it's tough to be reminded that our window of opportunity, as we say today, is closing. These are tough facts that most folks would prefer to ignore.

Most folks, and this might include you, are content to splash around with our colorful inflatables in the kiddie end of life's pool, never really swimming in life's depths. This service is, above all else, an invitation to life's deep waters, where the things that

really matter most have the room and the spiritual resources to live and grow. It's no accident that all living creatures came from the seas, and what is true biologically is true, in its way, spiritually.

People who are really going to live have to put out into deep spiritual waters, and you don't have to go far. You simply have to be willing to step into that God-shaped pool of living water that Jesus spoke of that is at the center of each and every one of us, carved out at our birth by divine love.

Lent is the invitation to those waters. Don't be afraid, the water's fine. And there's a lifeguard on duty, who slumbers not nor sleeps.