

### **Ash Wednesday 2009**

It is a bit strange that on the day we smear ashes on each other's foreheads, the day we walk around all afternoon feeling awkward and maybe even a bit embarrassed for this strange black cross emblazoned on our faces, Jesus tells us in Matthew to practice our faith in private.

And yet, of all Jesus' teachings, of all Jesus' parables and healings and miracles, this is the story that the church has decided to tell on this day for the last thousand and a half years.

There is no other day when it is so hard to be a Christian, I think.

This is something of what it must feel like to be a Catholic priest, and have that collar on your neck all the time, announcing to everyone you meet, the clerk at the grocery store, the waiter who gets your order wrong, the lady who cuts you off on the Lloyd—announcing to all of them what we believe.

Sure, at Christmas time we get all dressed up and we decorate our homes, but who doesn't do that? You would stick out more if you didn't put up a tree or a wreath.

At Easter we fill our yards with eggs and our children with candy, but again, there is not much threat to associating ourselves with the Easter bunny.

But today, there are no wreaths or bunnies. There are no public holidays to hide behind.

There are just ashes, the remains of something that once was alive and now isn't. After last year's Palm Sunday service, I took the palms and let them dry out in my office for a few weeks, then I burned them. In a few moments, we will smear the remains of those palms on each other's foreheads, a reminder that in more ways than one, we were dust once, we were once ashes, and we are on our way back to that with every passing breath.

And my temptation as a pastor and as a human being is to minimize that for you this morning. To talk about the triumph of the human spirit, to tell you to reach for the sky, to make something of yourself.

But there are plenty of other days for that.

Today is for mortality. A subject we avoid more than any other, and for good reason.

We like to hide our mortality in funeral homes and cemeteries, tucked away where most of the time we won't see it, and won't have to deal with it.

But today we wear it like a badge.

Depending on where you are this morning, it may feel like mortality is never far away. Your heart may be with a lost loved one, or someone who is returning to dust more quickly than the rest of us.

Or maybe you read the newspaper today. Or yesterday, or any other day for that matter, and there were ashes smeared all over each page.

War and murder, poverty and disease.

It is no wonder that the pews won't be full today like they are on Easter morning. This message is a bit too realistic, a bit too honest.

There is no other day when it is so hard to be a Christian, because most of us are polite people, we like to keep our faith to ourselves. We have no trouble praying in private, the alternative of praying loudly out in the open scares us to death.

Sure, in certain circles, we feel okay sharing something of what we believe, but we all know the limits, those unspoken boundaries where faith-sharing becomes tacky or inappropriate.

But then, against our better judgment, we walk back to our offices or our classrooms or our families with an ashen badge, telling everyone we meet in no uncertain terms that we belong to Jesus.

I remember, before I was a pastor, sitting in the Ash Wednesday service every year and hoping that my cross wouldn't be too big, that it might just look like a shadow, or maybe my hair would hide it a bit.

I even know of people who march straight out of these services and wash them off, unable to spend the rest of the day with such a glaring and vulnerable sign of their faith. I don't blame them.

It is not just that the ashes make us stand out, or that they are ugly, it is what they represent that offends us so.

For the most part, we spend our time around here talking about the beauty of the human spirit. The nobility of the soul. You can watch a play in the theater, you can read a sonnet in your English literature class, you can discover the intricacy of creation in the chemistry lab.

Every school in the world is built around the notion that if you apply yourself, you can improve. You can free yourself from whatever limitations life has imposed on you.

But these ashes remind us that there is one limitation we can't escape, no matter how hard we try, no matter how far we run. Remember that you are dust, and in time, you will go back to being dust.

Why do we do it? Why do we show up every year, knowing full well what's coming? Why do we keep following him, even when the crowds start yelling, "Crucify?"

Because it's the truth. Because this is the only road that leads to life.

Ash Wednesday dares us to live each moment as if we belonged to God, to take each breath as a gift, and to give up the foolish notion that our lives are our own.

That's why Lent is not about making new year's resolutions to eat less chocolate, it is about finding ways to remind yourself that you are dust. Apart from God, you are nothing.

That may seem fatalistic or depressing, which is why so many choose not to follow Jesus. If you're trying to figure out what's in it for you, you'll never hear what you're looking for.

But the truth is, it is the most liberating gospel ever preached.

Because we have a God who leaves his fingerprint on our foreheads, we have a God who breathes life into our dust, we have a God who wears our skin and walks head first into our death.

Triumph of the human spirit is a nice message. I don't know if it's an honest message, but it's a nice message. But it won't sell around here.

Because for those of us trying to follow Jesus, we know that the only path to life is through a cross. That to give up everything is to gain what matters.

And that God doesn't breathe life into responsible, hard-working, highly accomplished, deserving folks. God breathes life into dust.

So let us gather around, smear our embarrassment across our foreheads, and let the world know the truth. That we are dust, that we always were.

And once we recognize that, we can find out the rest of the story.

That there is one who knows us better than we know ourselves, who breathes life even into those of us who don't know what to do with it. And that is not just good news, it's the truth.