

AN UNFLINCHING LOOK

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Grace Church in New York
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Ash Wednesday

Jesus said, "But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (Matthew 6:17-18)

One day last year, soon after Easter, I was working in my office on a glorious spring morning. The window next to my desk looks out on the rectory yard, and I was momentarily taken by the cloudless blue sky, the leaves budding on the trees, and the perennial flowers beginning to peek through the myrtle. Soon I heard what sounded like the happy squeals of a toddler. I looked and, sure enough, a little girl of perhaps 2 or 3-years old was running up and down the walk under the watchful gaze of her mother. It was a happy scene, one that was fun to watch. All was right with the world: spring had sprung, people are wonderful.

Oops, not so fast. As I watched, the happy scene took a decidedly unhappy turn. Across the yard, a single brilliant yellow daffodil caught the eye of the child. Before her mother could stop her, she had raced over to the flower. As her mother shouted, "No!" the little girl seized the long stem and with one violent tug yanked it free from its roots. She ran back to present the flower to her mother, to receive not a reward, but a scolding and a not insignificant swat on her bottom. The woman grabbed the girl's hand to beat a hasty retreat out of the rectory yard. But first she looked to the right, then looked to the left, then ditched the tattered flower under a bush.

It all happened so quickly it took me a moment to process the various levels of sin: the impulsive grab at forbidden fruit, the destruction of nature and beauty, the corporal punishment, and the hiding of evidence. I thought to myself, "Little do they know that the Rector, who sees in secret, saw the whole thing."

In just a few moments you will come to the front of the church and receive on your forehead a mark of ashes. The imposition of ashes is a liturgical practice that goes back at least a thousand years in Christian history. In former days the church would excommunicate from its fellowship and its sacraments those who were notorious public sinners. But if such people were truly sorry for their sins, they could amend their lives and return. They began a period of penance in the presence of the faithful. They clothed themselves in penitential garments and received a smudge or a sprinkling of ashes on their foreheads. It was a public admission of their complicity in the many levels of sin, and their dependence on God's forgiveness. The period of penance would end on Easter Day, when the church restored the sinners to fellowship.

Over the centuries the practice of liturgically singling out the notorious sinners fell by the wayside. But the imposition of ashes remained for all people who wished to undertake a period of penitence and self-denial that might draw them closer to the Lord. Eventually such a period came to be known as Lent, and the church has kept it ever since. So today we begin Lent with the ancient tradition of ashes. Whether you are a notorious sinner, or a miserable offender, or a juvenile delinquent, or merely an accidental tourist, we all receive the same cross-shaped sign of ashes on our foreheads, with the words: *Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*

Ash Wednesday comes with a peculiar reading from the Gospels. For centuries the church has appointed for today one particular portion of the Sermon on the Mount. We've heard Jesus

speaking to a crowd about their religious observances. Specifically, Jesus warned them and us not to be like the hypocrites. What do the hypocrites do? On the one hand they make outward, public displays of their faith so that all will think well of them. But on the other hand, when no one is looking – or at least when they think no one is looking – their deeds are far from the ways of the Lord. Jesus warned us against such hypocrisy, and among other things he said, *“And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces, that their fasting may be seen by others. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face.”*

Does anyone notice that something is amiss? Jesus warned against public displays of piety. He was even so specific as to tell us to wash our faces and not disfigure them. And here we are, about to begin Lent by putting ashes on our foreheads. Here we are about to disfigure our faces. Why are we doing the very thing that Jesus told us not to do? How do we fit these two incongruous puzzle pieces together?

Let me tell you how I’ve come to reconcile the apparent disconnect between Scriptural command and liturgical practice. By doing precisely what Jesus told us not to do, our Ash Wednesday confession is that we often do the precisely what Jesus warned us not to do. We don’t like to admit that we are not the people God wants us to be, but the sad truth is: we are not. The impulsive grab at what does not belong to us starts early. Some even say that sin is original to our nature. Make of the old doctrine what you will, the sad truth is that no one can get through life without being caught up in the web of sin, and stained by its effects. We trample on nature and destroy beauty. We abuse each other by sins of omission and commission. We look to the right and look to the left and hope we’ve gotten away with it. But our heavenly Father, who is in secret, sees all. So you see, our sins have marked our foreheads long before we entered this church. The mark of ashes is there already, whether we come forward to receive it or not. I submit to you that it would be hypocritical *not* to be marked with the ashes. Before you wash them off today, look in the mirror. It is better to take an unflinching look at ourselves now, so that by God’s grace, sin won’t get the best of us.

Not since 1945 has Ash Wednesday fallen on Valentine’s Day. Here are two more incongruous puzzle pieces to fit together. In this regard I think of someone I once knew who truly loved his wife, but saw only too late how the ashes of sin accumulated, and got the better of him, and devastated his beloved. Keith was a man in his 70s who had enjoyed a long career in finance. He had a talent for picking the right stocks and making money hand over fist. His wife, Polly, was the head nurse on the cancer ward of a hospital. Polly was devoted to Keith, and because they never had any children of their own, she could be as committed to her career as Keith was to his. But at length Polly began to talk to Keith about retirement. It was time to build their dream house in Florida.

Keith put off retirement year after year and continued to pour himself into his work, making more money than they could ever spend. Polly swallowed her disappointment and pressed on with her work until she fell seriously ill with cancer. She died within a year, never to enjoy a day of retirement. Polly’s death devastated Keith. With sudden clarity he saw the mark of sin on himself that he had never before dared see. But he could do nothing to atone for all he had done and left undone in his marriage. No amount of drinking could ease his guilt. Large gifts to the hospital and the church in Polly’s name did not bring her back. Finally, he built the house in Florida to Polly’s exact specifications, hoping against hope that her spirit would come and ease his pain. When he moved in he felt only a more profound sense of her absence. At length, Keith concluded that the only way out of his hell was to take his own life. He simply could not forgive himself. He could not get past the ashes.

Call it a cautionary tale, if you like, for the coinciding of Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day. Yes, I believe that when Keith reached the end of his rope, and decided that the only thing he could do was let go and fall into the abyss, he fell into the arms of Christ, who would deal with him in love and mercy. Nevertheless, when I learned of his death I grieved that he left early, and did not hold on to receive the life of Christ in the time of this mortal life when he still had value and could accomplish much good. I grieved that he could not throw himself on the mercy of Christ, and trust that the Lamb of God is truly able to take away the sins of the world.

Ash Wednesday comes but once a year so that things can be different for us. Our original sin does not have to be the defining mark of our lives. Ash Wednesday comes so that you and I, while we still have time, can take an unflinching look at our sin, and repent. The Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, desires not the death of sinners, but rather that we may turn from our wickedness and live.

Therefore we beseech him to grant us true repentance, and his Holy Spirit, that those things may please him which we do on this day, and that the rest of our life hereafter may be pure and holy, so that at the last we may come to his eternal joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen. (The Book of Common Prayer, p. 269)

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