

Crosses of Ash

I am glad to see you here on this Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. The season of Lent is the forty days preceding Easter. If you count backward forty days from Easter Day, not counting Sundays, the first day of Lent always falls on a Wednesday. But why is this day known as *Ash* Wednesday?

Ken Collins suggests a possible explanation of how ashes may have come to be used on this holy day and given its name.

“Biblical societies relied very heavily on wood fires for heating and cooking, which meant that keeping ashes under control was a major housekeeping task. Then, as now, if a person was preoccupied with something serious, they didn’t always tend to the housekeeping—it’s the least of their concerns. Imagine that [there’s been] a death in the family. A friend stopping by to pay their respects might gently say, ‘Did you know you have ashes on your face?’ So [over time], ashes came to be a sign of [mourning], remorse, [and] repentance... back then, people put ashes on their foreheads.” Eventually, this practice became part of the tradition of Israel and the early church.

But through the centuries, times changed. The secular culture around us values self-confidence, strength, and maintaining the

appearance—at least the *outward* appearance—of everything being just fine, thank you very much. Modern, sophisticated citizens of the twenty-first century don't normally go around with ashes on their heads. So why do we begin the days of Lent with the imposition of ashes?

As people who bear the name of Christ, we put on these ashes because we *need* them. *We need these crosses of ash because they help us understand where we came from, where we are today, and where we're going.* And that's what we reflect on this evening.

You and I are finite creatures, created from dust. These dusky ashes remind us of that fact. Ash Wednesday confronts us with our own mortality. Genesis tells us that we are dust and to dust we shall return. That's difficult to hear and difficult to accept. We've gotten kind of used to living in these bodies. It's not easy to think about an end to this life. If this were Ash Wednesday's only message for us, we would be a people utterly without hope.

But Ash Wednesday has more to say to us. Much more. It's not just about where we came from. It's also about who we are now. It's about you and me. Fallen human beings. With smudges on our hearts.

A smudge of ash on my forehead is a sign of the smudges on my heart. A sign of the tarnish of sin for which I stand in need of repentance. Repentance means praying, with the psalmist, for God's grace to cleanse me from the inside out. Beginning with my heart. To pray with the psalmist: *Create in me, O God, a clean heart.*

And I think we find part of God's grace-filled answer to that prayer in the Gospel of Matthew, in the words of Jesus. His teaching helps us understand not only *who* we are, but *whose* we are. And what that means for us.

You and I belong to God. We were created to be in relationship with God. When we give, when we pray, when we fast, these means of grace draw us closer into that loving relationship.

But each day, many things distract us from this most essential of relationships. The ancient practice of fasting removes distractions that divert our focus from where it most needs to be. If—for a time—I abstain from food, if I experience the emptiness of a fast, as opposed to the fullness I'm accustomed to, that emptiness brings thoughts of those who are empty *every* day. Fasting moves you and me first toward prayer and then toward giving. Nudges us

to ask what we can do to alleviate the hunger of others. Nudges us to pray a prayer like this one:

How, Lord, how can I simplify my life so that someone else's most basic needs can be met? How can I help ensure that everyone has a share of the abundance you have provided? What can I do? What can I give? How, Lord, how can I claim to love you and not reach out a hand to your children who are in need? Amen.

My sisters and brothers, notice that Jesus doesn't *command* us to give. Or to fast. Or even to pray. Jesus *assumes* that faithful disciples are going to do these things. What Jesus is looking at is our *motives* in giving, in fasting, in praying. And Jesus is asking *us* to take a long, hard look at our motives, too. Whose affirmation are we seeking? Whose approval are we seeking? Whom are we *really* striving to please?

Jesus tells us what pleases the One he calls Father. The One who yearns to hear from you. Just you. Alone. In the stillness. In private. One-on-one conversation. Listening and speaking. Intimate communion. It's not that God doesn't know you completely. It's not that God doesn't know what you need even better than you do. It's not that God doesn't know your every thought. It's not that God—

who knows everything about you—doesn't know what you're going to say even before the words come out of your mouth.

What it is, is that God longs to hear what you have to say. God cherishes each and every one of your prayers. God loves you more than you can possibly imagine. God loves being in relationship with you, a relationship that we know is made possible through Jesus Christ.

The One you and I follow. We follow him on a path that leads to a cross. The cross shapes our lives. And on this Ash Wednesday, crosses of ash mark us as Christ's.

Crosses of ash mark us as people whose hearts are being cleansed. Crosses of ash mark us as people who've been pardoned and forgiven. Crosses of ash mark us as people who receive a priceless treasure to embrace with all our hearts—*for where our treasure is, there our hearts will be also*. Crosses of ash mark us as people of hope, as people with a future promised by the very One who holds that future. Crosses of ash mark us as a people entering into life in Christ's great kingdom that begins today and has no end. Thanks be to God!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.