

**February 18, 2015**  
**Ash Wednesday**  
**St. Andrew's Episcopal Church**

*"Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart."*

*In the name of God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.*

A young father asked his 7 yr. old daughter to clean up her room during their usual Saturday morning family chore time. She emerged from her room after 5 minutes and said to him, "I'm done! Can I watch TV?" Suspicious, he went to investigate. Her room indeed, looked clean and pristine.

Until . . . he opened the closet door and was about buried by the avalanche. So, he got a book, and sat there in his daughter's room on a stool reading, while she cleaned her closet. With Dad present, she got in gear and almost happily cleaned her closet, folding and putting clean clothes in drawers and on hangers, and then putting the dirty clothes and wet towels in the hamper. When she was finished she went and hugged him and said, "You're the best Dad in the world."

Someone has suggested that Ash Wednesday is THE most honest day of the year for the church, because the closet door gets opened and the dirty laundry tumbles out for us and God to have a look at. So, what will be accomplished by this deep soul-searching on Ash Wednesday?

The first reason to engage in this self-examination, is that if we do Ash Wednesday and our Lenten journey well, the church can become one of the precious few places where we can be our TRUE selves, where we can bring every part of ourselves and be ACCEPTED. In a place of genuine acceptance, it's okay to bring not just the "good" parts, the things we joyfully share and celebrate like new births, safe homecomings, and positive medical reports. In a place of true welcome and acceptance, we are invited and encouraged to bring those things we prefer that no one else ever find out about us: our worst & most well-hidden secrets; our most painful regrets; our deepest doubts; the addictions that plague us; our sense of unworthiness. We CAN bring it all here,

because the truth we speak on Ash Wednesday is that we are finite and flawed. We are not God. We are magnificent and broken, beautiful creations of God, a co-mingling of dirt and divinity. On Ash Wednesday we finally can breathe together a huge sigh of relief when we again admit this. And if I can accept this reality about myself – my life is time-limited, and it is both sinful and precious in God’s sight, then I can start to more easily accept you for who you are – the real you, limited, both beautiful and flawed. Naming and accepting our human reality and frailty is part of what Ash Wednesday is about. The other part is about accepting God’s forgiveness and love for us, and paying attention to God’s desire to cleanse and renew us. Because God simply loves us too much to leave us in the place God finds us.

The second reason to observe Ash Wednesday is because this IS the work of the Christian faith COMMUNITY, our work as the body of Christ - to tell the truth about ourselves and God, so that we can be made holier, more Christ-like people, willing to take the risks of following Jesus in the way of cross-shaped living. As surely as we all have personal sins to confess, Ash Wednesday is bigger than that. It is more than our own individual baskets of dirty laundry we bring here. Here we dump out the whole jumbled heap of human mess, our corporate dirty laundry too, and admit that collectively, we have missed the mark of God’s design for us in major ways. Our human systems – religious, political, social, economic – are all sinful, and especially prone, in subtle and not so subtle ways, to abuses of power. As social beings, we cannot escape being caught in the webs created by our human and flawed systems. So it’s not just mine and yours, it’s ours – OUR collective sin that harms the whole human family and created order, and draws us away from the heart of God.

The third reason we begin our Lenten journey with this Ash Wednesday liturgy is that repetitive cleansing is required for the transformation and shaping of holy people. In a few minutes when we offer together the Litany of Penitence, pay close attention and see, if, as we name the long list of sins – those things done and left undone – there is a moment for you when you realize, “Yep – I need to be confessing this sin again, it’s still a problem.”

When Ash Wednesday does its work on us by God's grace, our sins get sorted out, cleansed, and put away through God's mercy. And then God sets to work - freshly clothing us with love, compassion, patience, generosity, and self-control. We become people who, humbled, cleansed and made new, are now strengthened to listen more closely for the heartbeat of God. Strengthened to turn toward our neighbor in love and with a spirit of peace. Strengthened to do the work of justice, reparation, and living in right relationship. Our part is to continue saying "Yes" to God's revealing, cleansing, and restorative work in us, because we surely cannot do such a make-over project on ourselves. We are utterly dependent on God to do the make-over in us, and for us.

The Lenten journey toward the cross and resurrection is the story of that ultimate makeover. The Sufi mystic, Rumi describes in a poem how God might think about this divine make-over work:

"I have come to drag you out of yourself and take you to my heart.

I have come to bring out the beauty you never knew you had, and lift you like a prayer to the sky.

If no one else recognizes you, I do, because you are my heart and my soul.

Don't run away, accept your wounds, and let bravery be your shield. . . .

Every step of the way I will walk with you and never leave you stranded".

What Rumi describes here is intense longing - PASSION. Jesus chose to walk the way of self-giving, suffering love, accepting his Passion, because he knew God's heart and the truth that lies there: WE are God's passion, friends. Is God ours? Let's walk on together, and find out. Amen.

[The Rumi poem is cited in **Gathering Up the Fragments: Preaching as Spiritual Practice**, Mariann Edgar Budde, (Lima, OH: CSS Publishing, 2009), p.112.

