

March 6, 2019 Ash Wednesday
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GOSPEL

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

The holy gospel according to Saint Matthew, the sixth chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

[Jesus said to the disciples:] ¹“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

²“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

¹⁶“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so 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.

¹⁹“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

I haven't spent too much of my life thinking about ashes. Perhaps not many of us do.

If you are intimately familiar with the art of making fires, you have probably paid more attention to these things.

One of my favorite television programs is the BBC's *Sherlock* where the timeless detective Sherlock Holmes brags about (among many other things) his skills in being able to identify 243 distinct types of tobacco ash.

At least once a year, though, I get to pay close attention to ashes...remembering to ask, how hot does the fire have to burn and for how long to reduce dried leaves and stems to an ash fine enough to cling to a finger...to leave a trace of a shape on the forehead? I remember (usually a little too late to do anything about it) to pay attention to the wind so the fire will burn safely...Then we are reminded not to rush...to respect the process of cooling...keeping the remains of the fire, those precious ashes, safe from being blown away before I can collect the remains of it that we need.

Without this annual discipline (or arcane references from detective stories), I might never think to differentiate the qualities of ashes.

Like so many things...up close...ash has particular details...textures...contours...but only from up close...only once you know it. There are very specific kinds of ashes, I have learned...just like they are many more specific kinds of bolts and washers than I knew about before I started helping Ryan work on cars (and I use the term "helping" loosely here). There are many more specific kinds of horses than I knew before Bailey started riding and telling me about them. There are things we each tend to with a level of attention that allows us to know the specificities of what looks generally indistinguishable to the untrained eye.

Today, we see the broad truth of our mortality...and we confess, in somewhat general terms the brokenness that is caused by our sinfulness. And yet, we need this whole season that is coming...these 40 days of Lent...to bring the level of attention necessary for us to know ourselves in our particularity... maybe more fully than we want to.

That we are unified in the human experience of finitude and failure is important. And we need to know that we share it in common. And...the specificity of our own sin also matters...because it takes specific knowledge, confession, and repentance to be a part of mending what has been broken.

I think there is even an example of this in the particular sins that are just under the surface of the stories of this day...in the lives of our ancestors, which often blend into the general shape of things. But they matter.

On this day, each year, we put in our mouths words that are attributed to David...the great, yet terribly flawed and sinful, king. We speak and sing David's psalm of repentance...but in speaking his words, we rarely memorialize the ones who were harmed by his sin.

David is said to have written Psalm 51 after being confronted by Nathan...after his rape of Bathsheba, his murder of Uriah...and his anguished plea for forgiveness comes from finally confronting the enormity of that sin. Yet, in the psalm he doesn't honor the names of the ones he has harmed. And maybe their particular sufferings are rendered invisible when we generalize his words of repentance. That we can all put David's words in our own mouths matters...but so do Bathsheba and Uriah...and the very specific people who this psalm speaks of, though not by name.

Lent offers us the difficult gift of self-examination...of being honest and specific about what harm we have caused and what forgiveness we need.

The practice of individual confession and forgiveness was mostly left behind in the Reformation's eagerness not to elevate the clergy so highly they might be seen as necessary mediators of God's grace. But maybe we need it. There is

value in being specific...in coming close...in learning the particularities and their names. Naming the exact sins, the exact people we have hurt. Naming, perhaps, that sometimes we have been too self-absorbed to even notice who we harm and how.

How many hundreds of types of ash have been burned in the fires of earth over the centuries? How many millions of sins have broken us apart? So many...

These ashes are particular ashes. They are made from palm leaves... from the leaves of the exact branches that we waved last year on Palm Sunday, when Jesus entered Jerusalem and was greeted with a joyful procession and shouts of "Hosanna!" These are very particular ashes...ashes made after the joy of that day turned sour in betrayal and then dried up over the course of a year...out of sight...

It is also true that when these ashes are prepared they are mixed with oil. It is the exact oil we use to anoint the newly baptized...to offer prayers of healing...

The ashes of joy turned dry and dead...are mixed with the oil that marks the newly risen heirs of God's love through Christ...

These are very particular ashes.

And we are particular people...as unique as anything...even in our brokenness...even in our mortality.

We are dust and ashes...but we are dust and ashes that have been gathered up into a wild, precious, particular life that is totally unique. There will never be another you. And we are made of the same stuff that has burned in the heart of the stars...and the same stuff that worms and bugs tunnel through under our feet. We are made of the stuff that God called into being out of nothingness...and called good.

Rev. K.C. Ptomey – who was a Presbyterian minister and on the faculty of Austin Seminary – once said, “Remember that you are dust...and find assurance that God is in love with dust no matter how messy it is.”

Yes, our sins have twisted specific fractures in the very bones of the Body of Christ. And yet our very bodies and lives are unique and uniquely loved by God.

The ashes of departed joy...turned into betrayal...are mixed with the oil of gladness and anointing.

The journey of Lent gives us time to learn up close the exact textures and contours of our hearts and inner lives... to examine ourselves... to confess and repent... and to live out of the love that we discover is the source of every fiber of our being.

Children of earth and dust...Welcome back to yourself. Welcome to the difficult and wonderful journey into the heart of truth. You are dust...and God is wildly in love with you. Welcome to Lent.

Amen.