

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 103:8-14; Matt. 6:1-6, 16-21  
Ash Wednesday

## Spring Cleaning\*

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My mother loves to hold on to things. I wouldn't say she's a hoarder by any means, but she does have a hard time getting rid of stuff, whether it be old magazines, travel souvenirs, or even my elementary school homework from the 1970s. As you might imagine, after four decades of living in the United States, her house is getting a bit cluttered. And ever since my dad passed away five years ago, it's been even harder for her to let go of things.

Recently my sister in law found an organizational coach for my mom. Did you know there is actually such a thing as an organizational coach? The coach comes by every week and helps my mom to sort through her items into three piles: things to keep, things to recycle, and things to let go. It's not easy, but we're proud of the progress that my mom is making.

Letting go is a good metaphor for the forty-day season of Lent that begins today, Ash Wednesday. The church history professor in me can't but point out that today's service has ancient roots and dates back over 1,200 years to at least the eighth century. It stems from the even more ancient (and biblical) practice of putting ashes on one's head to repent for sins that one has committed against God and neighbor.

Letting go is one way of understanding the various Lenten disciplines that are described in today's gospel from Matthew. Almsgiving is about letting go of our constant need for money and material goods. Prayer is about letting go of the idea that we are always self-sufficient and never need to call upon God for help. Fasting is letting go of our need for around-the-clock physical comfort. And, repentance – which was at the heart of the ancient practice of putting on ashes – is about letting go of entrenched notions that we're always right and stubbornly refusing to see ourselves in a new (and perhaps more realistic) light.

Somehow, over the centuries, this deeply spiritual idea of letting go has been transformed into a more painful notion of "giving up" things. Growing up in the Roman Catholic Church, I was always asked on Ash Wednesday, "So what are you giving up for Lent?" Have you seen the cartoon about Pope Benedict XVI's decision on Monday to resign from the papacy at the end of this month? There's a drawing of St. Peter's

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Basilica and the Vatican with a loud voice coming out of it saying “You’re giving up *what* for Lent?”

The other day, I came across a website that’s called “20 Weird Ideas to Give Up for Lent.” For me, the website was a real blast from my Roman Catholic past. Some of these suggestions included “don’t eat the last bite of your food,” and “park at the very back of the parking lot,” and “don’t straighten or curl your hair.”

While these ideas might be helpful for some, I would suggest that, for most of us, it’s probably more important to rethink Lent – not so much as a time for painful or arbitrary sacrifice, but rather as a time for spring cleaning, and for letting go of the spiritual clutter that weighs down our relationships with God.

What would it mean for us to let go of the idols of our childhood religions? That is, what would it mean for us to let go of the notion of a punitive, angry, and vindictive God? What if we let go of the demonic voices in our heads that tell us we’re never good enough, or smart enough, or rich enough, or attractive enough, or lovable enough? What if we let go of our deepest moments of despair in which we think life is not worth living, or that we can never be saved?

In a few moments, you will be invited to come up for the imposition of ashes. You will be reminded that you are dust and to dust you shall return. I suspect that some of us may hear this as a bleak reminder of our mortality and a thinly-veiled threat to repent “or else.”

But what if instead we understood the ashes as a beautiful reminder of a God who lovingly molds us from dirt, who passionately breathes life into us, and who powerfully sustains us throughout all the days of our lives on this earth and beyond?

As the collect for today says, “Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made.” The readings from the Book of Joel and from Psalm 103 remind us that our God is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” May we see the ashes on our foreheads as a reminder of our amazing love affair with a God whose love is so great that it spills out of the Trinity into all of creation, and who fashions us – out of mere dust – into the grandeur of God’s own image and likeness.

So what will you keep, recycle, and let go of this Lent? It’s not easy to clear out the spiritual clutter in our lives. But the progress is ultimately worth it.

+Amen.