

Ash Wednesday

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; 2 Cor. 5:20b-6:10; Matt. 6:1-6, 16-21

Spiritual U-Turn*

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In some ways, today's gospel reading from Matthew is perfect for Ash Wednesday, this first day of Lent. Jesus reminds us of three important spiritual practices that we can take on during the next 40 days: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting.

With almsgiving, we might choose to contribute our time, talent, and treasure to our parish or to other charities. With prayer, we might choose to deepen our spiritual life, such as attending morning or evening prayer regularly. And with fasting, we might choose to give up something pleasurable, whether it be chocolate or Facebook.

But if you think about it, today's gospel reading is also rather strange – particularly in light of the Ash Wednesday tradition of imposing a cross of ashes on our foreheads. In the gospel passage, Jesus tells us to avoid spiritual practices that can be seen by others. We should give alms in secret. We should pray by going into our room and shutting the door. And we should fast by washing our faces, and not by disfiguring them. As the prophet Joel writes in our Hebrew Bible reading, God wants us to rend our hearts, and not our clothing.

So how do we reconcile all of these instructions about making private devotions with the fact that we are basically walking around all day with ashes on our foreheads? Ash Wednesday is a very public liturgical day. In fact, it's the only day of the year when others can tell at a glance whether or not we've been to church. Or, for that matter, whether or not we identify as followers of Christ.

In my view, Jesus is not condemning all external forms of spirituality in today's gospel passage. Rather, he is saying that what really matters to God is what's going on inside of our hearts and minds, as opposed to what others might see on the outside. That is, what is the motivation for our spiritual practices? Is it to increase our love for God and for neighbor? Or is it merely to advance our own spiritual pride and standing in the sight of others?

In light of that, what should we be thinking about when we receive the cross of ashes on our forehead? How can we prepare our hearts and minds to hear the words: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return?"

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I would suggest that the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday can help us to reflect upon three themes: (1) mortality; (2) repentance; and (3) grace.

First, mortality. The reminder that we are dust – and to dust we shall return – comes from the third chapter of the Book of Genesis, when God reminds Adam and Eve after the fall that they are created from the earth and will one day return to the earth. In biblical times, ashes were a symbol of death because cities were burned and reduced to ashes during times of war. In some ways, Ash Wednesday is the most brutally honest liturgical day of the year because we are confronted with our mortality and the sobering fact that, one day, we will die.

Second, repentance. The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*, which means a turning of the mind. From the earliest days of the Church, Lent has been a time for turning around, or making a spiritual U-Turn. Although we know that we will die, we have no idea exactly when that will happen. It may be decades or years from now. But it may be months. Or days. Or perhaps only hours.

Because life is so precious, God is constantly calling us to make a U-Turn away from the things that draw us to death, and towards the things that give us life. Who has God called you to be? Who do you love, and what do you love to do? What is it that makes you feel the most authentically alive? What were your childhood dreams, and how have you pursued them? Life is too short not to embrace fully who God is calling us to be. The cross of ashes on our foreheads – literally on our minds – is a reminder to repent, or to turn our minds towards God.

Third, grace. The imposition of ashes takes the shape of a cross, which symbolizes God's grace and love for us. Our salvation is purely a matter of gift. It is not something that we deserve or earn. As Paul writes in today's epistle reading from his Second Letter to the Corinthians, we must never accept the grace of God lightly. Although we are called to make a spiritual U-Turn during Lent, we are powerless to do so without God's help.

In fact, it is only when we recognize our utter dependence upon God that God's grace will start working within us. God's grace also gives us hope and saves us from despair. As Paul writes in the eighth chapter of his Letter to the Romans, nothing – absolutely nothing – will separate us from the love of God in Christ. We may be made of dust, but we are also animated by God's breath and love.

Mortality. Repentance. Grace. I invite you to reflect upon these three internal themes as you receive the external cross of ashes on your forehead. May you have a meaningful beginning to the season of Lent. And remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.