

## **Ash Wednesday: A Gracious Smudge Will Do**

Given that today's scripture readings are far more powerful and challenging than anything I can say or even quote, I'll begin simply by reading from the instruction manual for priests. In Bishop Neil Alexander's book *Celebrating Liturgical Time* he describes some of the basic choreography of the day, marked not by visible piety or high drama but by simplicity and restraint:

The ashes should be received by the clergy, or others imposing ashes, before they are distributed to the congregation. Care should be taken not to over-ritualize the receiving of ashes by the liturgical ministers lest it appear to be a focus of devotion that distracts the people from the intensity of their prayer. The ashes are imposed with the thumb, not the index finger. It is customary to impose the ashes in the form of a cross, but there is no need for excessive attention to artistic quality; a gracious smudge will do.<sup>i</sup>

A gracious smudge will do. This is a rite that began as something very specific rather than a ritual for everyone. The imposition of ashes began as the first public step in a process of reconciliation, in which those who had become estranged from the church by reason of grievous sin could re-enter its doors. By receiving ashes on their head – and it was then an actual flurry of ashes on the top of the head itself rather than a symbolic rendering on the forehead – those people who had separated themselves from the church expressed their willingness to enter what Bishop Alexander calls a “40-day process of continued discipline and penitence that would conclude during Holy Week with their full restoration, in anticipation of celebrating the paschal Triduum in full communion with the church.” (The Triduum refers to the 3 days that lead up to and include Easter: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Great Vigil of Easter).

We know in our own lives how difficult and elusive that reconciliation can be. Whether in our families, or our communities, or our churches, or in our cultural life, forgiveness can feel like nothing more than a nice idea. This kind of wholehearted forgiveness requires of us a degree of humility and grace that our strength-based culture would dismiss: this is ironic, of course, because while the vulnerability and weakness of true

faith looks to the world to be passive, it in fact requires of us a great measure of fortitude and resilience.

Reconciliation demands a patience and a focus all but banished in the digital age. It requires of us all a commitment not to cast away forever those who threaten our safety and comfort, but instead to be willing to welcome them back when they seek restoration. This cannot happen in a community that hungers for scapegoats and loves to see the mighty collapse. There is virtually no language for the actual process of forgiveness in our world, and very few opportunities to practice it even within our families and our churches.

Well, there are of course opportunities all around us. Any time there is a broken relationship, any time that we have diminished another human being, and friends I must say that if most of us took a moment to write down all the times that we have diminished another person, whether through the corporate actions of our wider economy or through the simple banal garden variety ways that we tear our neighbors down in order to keep the world spinning around the nucleus that is us. When we diminish another human being to build ourselves up, we sin. But when we sin, we can be restored through forgiveness.

But have penitence and forgiveness become lost arts?

This practice of receiving ashes as a first public sign of restoration to a community (really, as a first public act of repentance) tells me that where our world approaches forgiveness as quaint and impossible, our Christian faith is hard-wired to practice and enact the restoration of the penitent.

Imagine this. Imagine that if someone had become separated from the community (and I'm really only talking about grievous sins: theft, adultery, or lying) and wished to return, they could actually look forward to a time of the year when they could present themselves, essentially, as a penitent seeking forgiveness. It wasn't easy and it wasn't private, and it certainly wouldn't be quick, but imagine how much it changes the community and the relationships within simply to know that such reconciliation was even a *possibility*, to say nothing of the fact that it was actually normative, even expected.

I don't think this is romanticizing those early communities too much. Clearly, if such a robust ritual existed then they must have suffered the same hurts and breakdowns within the community as any church today. We know and we grieve that churches are places where people get hurt. But churches can also be places where those hurt people can heal, when one, folk can seek forgiveness, and two, the restorative grace of God is given space to move.

Of course, it must be said that this kind of open forgiveness and reconciliation is not really practiced in most churches. We preach it, we talk about it, we allow it and even encourage it, but it doesn't really happen that way. If someone stood before us today and asked to enter a period of penitence and forgiveness, it would be such an aberration, it would stand out so much, that we wouldn't know what to do with it.

The practice of imposing ashes evolved, of course, from specific penitents repenting of specific transgressions to a more general embrace of mortality and sin. Which of course makes it harder to take responsibility for the ways that we hurt others or turn away from God, but at least it brings us all into this place of need and hunger for god's forgiveness. We name here today that *all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of god*.

But what might our church look like if that act of public penitence for actual sins (again, I'm talking about the grievous ones, we don't need to hear from the ones who used up the copier toner and didn't replace it) was a part of our practice. What if it was safe to do so, without fear of recrimination and gossip and heaven forbid re-posting?

What if a community was so fearless that folks could indeed see and celebrate that this kind of vulnerability and hope and rebirth was a spiritual gift to be desired, not a shame to be avoided?

I frankly don't know that this kind of thing is possible today. Churches, for one thing, tend to be too big and complex for this kind of unity of thought around the care of penitents. More to the point, I think that in order for this kind of public penitence to happen (and if it did, by the way, the church would certainly look very different) we would really need a different kind of understanding of what it means to be a the church.

We would need, I think, to be a community of vows and covenants, almost like those that monastics take upon entering the cloister. Without vows, without rules of life, without covenants of fidelity and humility before God and one another, this kind of radical and full-bodied openness is simply too frightening to imagine.

In the last few years many churches have sought to take this day into the marketplace by offering “Ashes to Go,” in which priests suit up in cassock & surplice and head into public places: to bus stops, street corners and parks to offer ashes to those going about their day. We did this a few years ago ourselves. The results are mixed: the visibility is always good, but a lot of those public places were as sparse as many of our churches.

But in a really thoughtful article called “ashes to stay” my colleague in Winston Salem Steve Rice reminded me that that ashes draw much of their meaning from the confessions that accompany them: we confess to God, to each other, and to the whole communion of Saints. He writes that “The confession is public and communal and therefore the repentance and reconciliation is public and communal. This cannot be understated. There is implied accountability when we kneel *together* for Psalm 51. There is explicit accountability as we say again and again *we confess to you, O Lord, and Accept our repentance, O Lord*.”<sup>ii</sup>

This is the accountability, this is the vulnerability, this is the hope of forgiveness that can only come when we live out of a covenant of fidelity to one another. When we sin, it is because we have broken the bonds of that covenant. When we are restored to one another, it is because the bonds of the covenant are more resilient than we imagine (if our imagination does not reckon with the limitless power of forgiveness.)

To begin to walk once again the path of penitence, to begin to once again name the covenants that bind us together, to try out words that express our grief and alienation and even sadness, the words of bishop alexander I think hold true: A gracious smudge will do. That smudge is a sign of entrance, a sooty admission into the work of reconciliation.

That path begins in a lowly place, though, on our knees before God, with tears and sadness in front of one another, as we admit what we have done wrong. As we seek the forgiveness of our brothers and sisters. As we

let go of the brittle needs of our surface selves, we will find ourselves, strangely, freer and more spirit-filled than we were before.

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<sup>i</sup> J. Neil Alexander, *Celebrating Liturgical Time: Days, Weeks & Seasons*, p. 97. Church Publishing: New York, 2014

<sup>ii</sup> Steve Rice, *Ashes to Stay*, <http://www.ritualnotes.com/>.