

**Ash Wednesday 2012**  
**Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**  
*Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust*  
**The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller**

Funny Story:

Two older women were sitting together in church listening to a fiery preacher. When the preacher condemned the sin of stealing, these two women cried out, “AMEN, BROTHER, AMEN!”

When the preacher condemned the sin of lust, they yelled out, “PREACH IT, PASTOR! PREACH IT!”

When the preacher condemned the sin of lying, they jumped to their feet and screamed, “RIGHT ON! TELL IT LIKE IT IS!”

When the preacher condemned the sin of gossip, the two women got very quiet. One turned to the other and said, “He stopped preaching and now he’s meddling.”

The season of Lent is a time for meddling. That’s what we find happening in our reading from Matthew’s Gospel. Jesus is meddling in the religious practices of his day:

- giving alms (what we call sharing our blessings with others),
- prayer, and
- fasting (what we call giving up something for Lent).

Jesus is not questioning the validity of doing these things, in fact he is saying we should do these things. He calls into question the motivation behind doing these things. He questions the motivation behind everything we do.

Jesus is saying that when we do things to be seen by others, the attention and affirmation we receive is the reward. That’s why Jesus says that such people are like hypocrites. They’re acting.

The word *hypocrite* comes from ancient Greek theater to describe someone who wears a mask to play a role. While not a negative word in the original context, Jesus implies that doing religious things so we can be seen by others is like playing a role, performing for them. Jesus says there is no need for role playing. There is no need to show off one’s piety. There is no need for us to be hypocrites.

Oddly enough, tonight we have marked our foreheads with the sign of the cross in a very public way with ashes, for all to see. It’s a mark that gets noticed by others. Doesn’t Jesus tell us not to do that?

Why did you come up to receive the ashes on your forehead? What was your motivation?

I don’t know about you but I quickly forget those ashes are on my forehead. I’ll get home tonight and my children will ask – “Dad why do you have ashes on your forehead?” And I will tell them why.

There are three reasons why we put ashes on our foreheads on this night:

1. For cleansing
2. For a reminder of our mortality
3. For the treasure that is already ours

### **First ashes are for cleansing**

In biblical times ashes were used like soap – for physically cleaning the body with the lye in the ashes. In time the practice of putting ashes on one’s head was an outward sign of inner cleansing. It showed one’s commitment to turn away from sin and turn back to God in obedience. Job is a great example. God gives him a lengthy lecture about what’s what and Job responds by saying, “I am deeply sorry and ashamed, and I sit in dust and ashes to show my repentance.”

By the 8th century, the church applied this spiritual practice of inner cleansing to Ash Wednesday. The priest would dump ashes on worshipper’s head during worship. Centuries later the practice changed to simply using ashes to mark people’s foreheads with the sign of the cross.

Thankfully we changed that practice over the years but the intent is the same. The ashes remind us of our need for inner cleansing and renewal. We are sinful and unclean. We need Jesus to come meddling into our lives and help us get cleaned up. The sign of the cross with ashes remind us of our baptism calling, where we have been washed clean -- dying to sin and rising to new life with Christ every day.

Ashes remind us of our need for spiritual cleansing.

### **Second ashes are a reminder of our mortality:**

Ashes are burned, spent, charred, and lifeless. Ashes are universal. Everything will turn to ashes when the heat is hot enough. Ashes remind us that all things are temporary in our world, including us. One day our lives will be spent, done, over, lifeless, dust, ashes. We are given life, and in the moment we take our first breath, we get closer and closer to our last breath.

You heard me say to you here tonight, “Remember that you are dust. And to dust you shall return.” That’s a sobering message. It’s a humbling message.

There’s an episode of *The Simpsons* where Homer is told by his doctor that he has only a few days to live. He is frightened by the news, but then has a change of heart and becomes a different person. Homer makes a list of all the things that he would like to do before he dies, and on his list are things like ride in a blimp and tell off his boss.

But on the list are also things like make amends with the neighbor who he’s always borrowing things from but never returned. Homer realizes that he has not been a model neighbor, and he hasn’t been the best father to his children either. So, he spends quality time with his son, and listens to his daughter play the saxophone instead of making crude comments.

I realize that *The Simpsons* is nothing more than a cartoon. But there is a message here for all of us. We know that someday we will die. Our time in this world is limited.

So, how would you live if you knew that your days were numbered?  
 Would you be more kind and more loving?  
 Would you treat your family and friends and even your enemies differently?  
 Would you say, "I'm sorry" to the people that you've hurt?  
 Would you be more forgiving?  
 Would you be more mindful to address the needs of others?  
 Would you share a little bit more of what you have with those who don't have?  
 What would you do?  
 How would you live?  
 What kinds of things would be on your list?

Tonight as we begin our Lenten journey we are mindful of our mortality. Life is short in this world. Our days are numbered. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

**Third ashes point to the treasure that is ours**

Ashes remind us that we need God's help. We need God's forgiveness. We need God's grace. We need God's love. We are totally dependent on God every day.

Tonight we are also reminded that "The steadfast love of the Lord endures forever." How refreshing to hear those words no matter what our situation.

That's our hope smeared in the ashes on our foreheads. That's the treasure for living everyday. God's love has reached into our sinfulness, through the shadow of death, into the dust and the ashes of our human life. God's love is our hope for the future.

We may be dust, but we're loved dust. Nothing in this world, not even death, can separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ. Nothing can separate us from God's love.

May Jesus come meddling into our lives this Lenten season bringing the steadfast love of the Lord which endures forever. And may that love motivate us daily to live as faithful disciples of Christ Jesus, our Lord, as we journey to the Easter victory that is ours in this world and the next. Amen.