

Ash Wednesday Feb. 17, 2021
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Marking the Day
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

The Church has two traditions for marking Ash Wednesday, the first day in the season of Lent. One tradition is called the distribution of ashes, where we bless ashes and the priest puts some of those ashes on people's foreheads in the shape of a cross while saying, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

After doing Ashes to Go for the last six years, where I distributed ashes to the students and other people passing by the church, I learned to answer the question why we distribute ashes once a year quickly - most passersby have less than sixty seconds before they must move on to class or an appointment - and in a way a person who has never been to church can understand. The ashes are a symbol of our mortality, the reminder we and all life were made from the dust of the earth, and one day we will return to that dust when we die. We trace the ashes on foreheads on the shape of a cross because for followers of Jesus the cross is the symbol of God's love for us; God who created life does not throw away anything God made and loves. We are simultaneously reminded of our mortality and that because of God's Love, death is not the end for us. Thus our mortality is something all living things share, it connects us to each other, and makes us the same in God's eyes.

One of the gifts of Ashes to Go is it has helped me understand the reason behind the tradition of the church beyond the words in the prayer book, and how the tradition is intended to remind us visibly of our connection to the world and to each other.

Which means this year, in the midst of a pandemic that gives us daily reminders of our mortality by reporting the number of people who have died from COVID-19, instead of distributing ashes like we've always done, we have the opportunity to ask the question: What is the appropriate way to reflect on our shared mortality and God's love this year? Perhaps it's unnecessary to mark our foreheads with ashes when we already mark our faces with face masks every time we go out in public. So what should we mark instead?

During the pandemic, when state regulations and Diocesan guidelines and mandates discourage and prohibit gathering in large groups, require keeping at least six feet apart from each other, require wearing masks to limit the aerosols that could potentially spread the virus, encourage frequent hand washing and

reminds us not to touch our faces, we have learned we can still be present to our neighbors and each other in different ways. Things like our Tree of Giving, Sharing Cabinet, the Votive Prayer Hill, and turning CrossRoads Cafe into an outdoor to go only coffee ministry showed us we could still be present without being in-person.

Since our building is ever present, that is what we will mark today. Not with ashes. I'm not going to throw bags of ash on the building. I'm not going to make a mess. There is enough messy disruption these days. Instead, we are marking our church building by installing a memorial representing the nearly half million Americans who have died from COVID -19 since the pandemic began. It's a staggering number, at least for me. I struggle to picture what 500,000 individuals would look like, how many football stadiums it would take to hold that many people, what cities have populations that size. And yet, as difficult as it is for me to wrap my head around that number of people dying in a little over a year from the same virus, it is not difficult for me to imagine the many more than half million family members and friends who are grieving the loss of a mother or father, grandparent, in-law, child, best friend, boss, employee, neighbor, teacher, mentor, caregiver, spouse, fiancé, roommate, classmate, regular as clockwork customer, coach, volunteer, friend. There are so many possibilities for connection through relationship in our lives that the coronavirus doesn't care about.

But we do. We care about those connections and the people we are in relationship with. And even if we don't personally know any of the nearly half million people who died, if we worked at it, I'm sure we could find a relationship connecting us to someone who did, or who knows someone who did. And that is why there is a deep sense of grief associated with the mask wearing, six feet distance keeping, hand washing regulations. We aren't only sad we can't do what we normally do, or want to do, we are sad because these regulations and restrictions remind us of the presence of the terrible virus that doesn't care about people, connections, or the lives it has taken.

That is why today, on Ash Wednesday we are putting up a memorial, a way to show that we care, that we are connected, that we are grieving, and that we care so much this year we will refrain from participating in our traditional ritual of marking our faces with ash. We have a different way of remembering our shared humanity, our shared mortality, our shared connection to each other and God. Our memorial is comprised of archways like over a bridge or pathway, representing connection. On the archway and hanging from it are pieces of colored glass representing the many people who have died from COVID-19. When passersby look closely, they will also notice glimpses of their own reflection

representing our connection to each other. We have solar powered lights on the memorial so it will be illuminated at night, another light shining in the dark, a sign of respect, love, and hope. Our memorial can also be a reminder why even though we may be growing weary of the pandemic and the isolation that comes with it, we can and must continue following the regulations and guidelines for a while longer: to honor the dead and perhaps prevent another family suffering the grief of loss.

The second tradition of Ash Wednesday is the invitation to observe a Holy Lent, the season of penitence and fasting meant to prepare us spiritually for the celebration of Easter. Every year we use this day to consider giving up some luxury or perhaps a bad habit or to consider taking on a discipline like reading a daily Lenten devotional to help us grow spiritually during this season.

During a pandemic and after a year that has revealed how the inequalities in our country and the world hurts so many lives, when we can see so many people struggling with loss of income, loss of employment, loneliness, or are at a loss due to systemic racism, or won't receive the COVID-19 vaccine for many months, we can ask ourselves what is an appropriate way to express our penitence.

Perhaps this year the best way we can be penitent is to spend a moment every day acknowledging the sadness and grief of our current reality. Which means when we complain about not being able to gather in person for worship or to attend a concert or gather with family or even eat out at a restaurant, we can practice self-denial by fasting from such activity and acknowledge the sadness and grief of those who lost family and friends this year. At the start of every FaceTime or Zoom or other video conference maybe a form of prayer is letting yourself feel the grief of not being together in person while simultaneously feeling gratitude to see someone's face on a screen. Perhaps this year a Lenten discipline might look like taking a moment to prayerfully acknowledge our own exhaustion - physical and mental - caused by the pandemic before escaping to the soothing comfort of nostalgia. Perhaps we can refrain from trying too hard to make ourselves grow and instead honestly reflect on how we are and reach out to someone we know to listen to how they are.

Despite what it might sound like, this is not an invitation to despair. It's an invitation to start this season of Lent penitently. Penitence isn't feeling guilty for bad things we've done or the good things we have neglected to do. Penitence is the honest recognition of the cause of pain, injustice, grief, and loss. Penitence is how change, redemption, and transformation can start. Penitence is showing a radical faith and trust in God; it is the practice that believes nothing can separate

us from God and the love of God. Which means when we are brave enough to just be in our reality - no matter how sad or difficult or frightening it is - we might discover God is standing in the same reality with us, which makes all the difference. We aren't alone, even if we are keeping six feet apart, isolating at home, and quarantining.

None of us can predict how much longer the pandemic is going to last, how much longer we'll have to live with restrictions and regulations and church online. Neither can we force the world to be the way we want it to be, and that can make us frustrated or angry or tired, maybe even feeling disconnected. That is why the Church has a Season of Penitence; not to remind us of what is frustratingly beyond our control, but to remind us of what we are a part of, to help us sense and participate in our connection to each other and the world on a deeper level. Perhaps this year more than any other, we have the opportunity to participate in that connection as a radical act of faith.

Although it looks different, the reminder and the invitation have not changed. Today I remind you: From dust you came and to dust you shall return.

And - I invite you in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance, by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by the reading and meditating on God's holy Word.