

WE'VE HAD ENOUGH

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Grace Church in New York
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Jesus said, *“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.”* (Matthew 6:16)

Let's begin with my Lenten confession to you. Even as I stand in this pulpit tonight, Ash Wednesday is not the first thing on my mind. It is not the primary reason today is important to me. You see, it was twenty-five years ago today, on February 17th, 1996 when my otherwise strong and vigorous father died. It was a Saturday. Dad was an Episcopal priest who, only seven weeks to the day earlier, had officiated at Stacie's and my wedding in the church where I was the brand new rector. He was 2 ½ weeks shy of his 65th birthday, and planned to announce his retirement to his vestry at their next meeting.

On the morning of Friday the 16th, the day before his death, Dad had been out playing tennis, something he loved to do. When he came home he laid down for a nap. In his sleep he suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and he never regained consciousness. By Saturday all of us were able to gather at his hospital bedside, even my younger brother and sister-in-law who had recently moved to Germany. We learned from the doctors that Dad had no brain activity, and they prepared us for the turning off of his ventilator, the only thing that was keeping his body alive. It took ten minutes for his heart to consume the remaining oxygen in his blood, and realize that no more was coming. At 8:11 pm, twenty-five years ago today, my father's earthly pilgrimage was finished.

Ash Wednesday in 1996 came just four days later. For reasons I don't recall, it also happened to be the day we chose for Dad's funeral. Of course, no one in my family nor I received the imposition of ashes that day. The thought never even crossed my mind. I did not need ashes on my forehead as an outward and visible sign of mortality, because that was the day I held in my hands the little box containing my father's ashes, and placed it in the ground at the graveside service. To say the least, the reminder of mortality was sufficient unto the day. It was all that we could handle. We'd had enough.

As a priest of the church I can state with confidence that every year since 1996, without fail I have received the imposition of ashes. But not today. This year we are observing an ash-less Ash Wednesday. In normal times, not to have ashes on Ash Wednesday would be close to sacrilege. It would be an outrage in New York City. It would be like your favorite Chinese take-out place suddenly refusing to serve egg rolls. People like egg rolls with their Chinese take-out, and people like ashes on Ash Wednesday. Indeed, the phone has been ringing off the hook in the parish office today with calls from people inquiring about how to get their ashes. Normally we would present them with menu of multiple opportunities to make a right beginning of repentance: three worship services at 8 am, 12:10 pm, and 6 pm. Also at the top of the hour between 1 and 5 pm we'd offer an abbreviated form of prayer including the Litany of Penitence and the Imposition of Ashes. By end of the day we would have administered ashes to hundreds of people.

The custom goes back at least a thousand years in Christian history, though it wasn't always practiced in every place. In former days the church would excommunicate from its fellowship and its sacraments those who were notorious public sinners. But if such people were truly sorry for their sins, they could amend their lives and return. They began a period of penance. They clothed themselves in sackcloth and received a mark of ashes on their foreheads. The period of penance

would be finished on Easter Day, when the church restored the sinners to fellowship. Over the centuries the practice of liturgically singling out the notorious sinners fell by the wayside. But the imposition of ashes remained for all people who wished to undertake a period of penitence and self-denial that might draw them closer to God. Eventually such a period came to be known as Lent, and the church has kept it ever since, beginning with ashes on Ash Wednesday.

This year we have a problem. As all of us know far too well, we are still in the grip of the coronavirus pandemic. The risk of contagion from the normal practice of imposing ashes is too great. Therefore, in a recent letter to the churches of the diocese, the Bishop of New York urged the clergy and people to refrain from all forms of giving and receiving ashes: no mark of the cross on the forehead, no using a Pez dispenser or flour sifter to sprinkle ashes atop the head, no using disposable Q-tips to avoid touching, no ashes at all, neither inside nor outside. It is to be an ash-less Ash Wednesday, for me the first since 1996.

Perhaps, for reasons other than the pandemic, it's a good thing to hit the pause button on much of what we normally do today. One of the ironies of Ash Wednesday is the traditional Gospel passage from Matthew that we hear at all services. In it Jesus warns against showy displays of piety: "*And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.*" How do we reconcile the disconnect between these words and Jesus and our liturgical practice of disfiguring our faces? What has made sense to me is that by doing the very thing Jesus told us not to do, we are confessing that quite frequently we have done those things which we ought not to have done. I have preached as much in many Ash Wednesday sermons. Well, my second Lenten confession to you tonight is that perhaps all these years I have been practicing sermonic trickery, smoothing over an irreconcilable difference between Jesus' warning and our tradition. We also heard tonight the prophet Joel (2:13) caution against outward displays of piety: *Rend your hearts and not your clothing*, he said. So how about this year we actually obey the commandment of Jesus, and not hypocritically disfigure our faces? Perhaps we'll return to our disobedience a year from now, but as for today, let's not.

In a recent video sermon the Assistant Bishop of the Diocese, Allen Shin, lamented the loss of our Ash Wednesday practice this year. He spoke affectionately of the crowds who line up to receive the ashes, even as he wondered a bit about their zeal. In one church he noticed that he was putting ashes on the foreheads of people who already had ashes on their foreheads. It was as if they were on an "ash crawl," he said, going from church to church to see how it was done in each place. In the before time – that is, the time before the pandemic – I had wondered if Ash Wednesday was becoming just one more thing being swallowed up in the culture of excess, characterized by too much but never enough. This year our refrain might be, "We've had enough."

Allow me to suggest another reason why the pause button this year is a good thing. In the past eleven months the reminder of our mortality has been relentless. It has been all that we can handle. It has been sufficient unto the day. We've had enough. We do not need to disfigure our faces with ashes because our faces are already disfigured with masks. Let the masks this year be the mark of our mortality and penitence. Indeed, the masks don't just remind us of mortality, they scream of it as we approach a half-million American deaths to the virus. The masks speak of penitence – of our sorrow that merely by breathing the air we become deadly to each other. St. Paul lamented that *all of creation is groaning in bondage to decay (Romans 8:21-22)*. We can't stop ourselves from participating in the death-dealing way of nature, but we can repent of it and even slow it by wearing our masks today, and this Lent, and until the pandemic is past.

What is more, when you finally get your Grace Church mask in the mail, you'll see that it even has a little cross on it, just about the same size and shape as the mark of the ashes would be

on your forehead. *Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.* Many of you have wondered when, indeed, you will finally get your Grace Church mask in the mail. We keep talking about how they are on the way to our pledging households, but they never seem to arrive. Today we found out why. Early this afternoon every single one of the carefully weighed and metered envelopes came back to the church, marked as having insufficient postage. I have half a mind to take them all up to Union Square and set up a booth with a sign that says, "Masks to Go." The words of administration would be: *Here, have a mask.* Can you see me out there, people person that I am? Fear not, I will not give away your mask. It is coming to you! Make it your Lenten discipline to wear it.

Twenty-five years ago when I placed my father's ashes in the ground I read the burial words from the Book of Common Prayer: *In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our brother Jim; and we commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.* In all these years I have discovered that our sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life is a greater reality than I could have imagined. Dad doesn't just live in our memory. I have sure and certain hope – otherwise known as faith – that he lives in the mind of God amidst the saints in light. Not a day has gone by when I haven't felt his presence.

Earlier today I was speaking with my mother on the phone. She remembered that a week or so before Dad died, he told her about a strange but wonderful dream that he'd had. Dad not only liked playing tennis, he loved basketball too. In fact, as a freshman at Rutgers back in the late 1940s he tried out for the team as a walk-on. By his junior year he was a starter on the varsity squad – a 6'2 power forward. Seventy years ago basketball was a different game than it is today, but starting for Rutgers was no small accomplishment. It was then and remains today a really big deal. He explained to my mother that in the dream he was back in those days. He stole a pass, raced to the basket, went in for the lay-up, and then just kept going up and up and up.

We all go down to the dust. But to God's faithful people, life is changed, not ended. And when our mortal bodies lie in death there is prepared for us a dwelling place, eternal in the heavens.

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