

Matthew 6: 1-6, 16-21

Ash Wednesday

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A few years ago, I went with friends to see our friend Jack Ferver perform a one-person theater piece. We were in a small experimental theater in Massachusetts. Maybe 50-60 of us. The house lights were still fully on. Jack came out in costume and, instead of beginning on stage, walked straight into the audience. One by one, they went to each person. Sometimes sitting beside us. Sometimes on someone's lap. Looking directly into our eyes. Leaning in close. And whispering: "You're gonna die." To each and every person. It was intimate. A little unsettling. A strange way to begin a show. Remember you are dust. And to dust you shall return. That is not morbid. That is universal. "You're gonna die." And that whisper lands differently depending on how you hear it. As threat. As tragedy. As insult. Or as invitation. Because if death is the one thing we all share, then it is also the one thing that levels us. It undresses our illusions. It reminds us that whatever else we think we are-successful, forgotten, admired, anxious-we are first and finally creatures. Mortal. Dependent. Held.

And this is where the Church begins today. Ash Wednesday is the Church telling the truth. That we are not afraid to name sin. That we are not afraid to name death. We are not afraid to speak the facts of our lives out loud. Mortality is not an insult. It is reality. And today we walk around with that reality visible on our foreheads.

And yet today's gospel unsettles us. Jesus says, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them." Which is fascinating-because today our piety is very much seen. I think what Jesus is offering us is a stripping away of the mask. Don't turn devotion into performance. Don't turn repentance into theater. Don't turn faith into branding. "When you give... when you pray... when you fast..." Not if. When. But do it in secret. Your Father who sees in secret will reward you. So then, ashes are not theatrical guilt. They are moral clarity.

I have an app on my phone that reminds me five times a day that I am going to die. Five quotes. Five interruptions. Five small ashes. Every single day. Philip Roth: "The truth about life is that we shall die." T.S. Eliot: "In my beginning is my end." W.H. Auden: "Death is the sound of distant thunder at a picnic." And you may wonder-why in the world would someone choose that? Because hopefully, thinking about our mortality sharpens our compassion.

When you know you are dust, pettiness looks ridiculous. When you know your time is limited, ego feels exhausting. When you know you are going to die, you become less interested in applause and more interested in love. Mortality does not just humble us. It exposes our idols-the approval we chase, the resentment we rehearse, the comfort we protect at someone else's expense.

I once heard of a young mother diagnosed with an incurable disease. She had only months to live and a four-year-old son. People expected her to make a bucket list. To rush. To cram. To maximize every single moment. Instead, her mantra became: "I don't have time to hurry." No time to rush through bedtime. No time to postpone tenderness. No time to delay forgiveness. I don't have time to hurry. And yet we hurry past apologies. We hurry past reconciliation. We

hurry past the difficult conversation we know we need to have. We hurry past the people we love most, assuming there will always be more time. Calvary, maybe this should be our mantra is this upcoming season of Lent and waffle shop and LPS. I don't have time to hurry. This is Ash Wednesday wisdom. Not panic. Not frenzy. Not spiritual productivity. Clarity. When you know you are dust, you stop trying to prove you are eternal. And you start paying attention.

We all carry personal ashes- grief, addiction, regret, exhaustion. The forgiveness we withhold. The people we quietly despise. And we carry collective ashes -the injustices we lament and the systems we quietly benefit from and prefer not to see. We do not only suffer injustice. We participate in it. We do not need to go looking for ashes. They are already on our hands. The question is not whether we carry them. The question is whether we will face them.

Lent invites us to descend. Not to wallow. But to tell the truth. And when we tell the truth long enough-about our sin, our fear, our limits-something surprising happens. Truth does not crush us. It clears space. And we can tell the truth from the ground because God has knelt there before us. Job declares, "I know that my Redeemer lives... though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God." A tax collector stands far off, won't even lift his eyes, and mutters, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." A thief dying next to Jesus pleads, "Remember me."

Ash Wednesday does not deny death. It denies that death is ultimate. It denies that shame is ultimate. It denies that the accuser is ultimate. The accuser-that voice inside and beyond us that confuses shame with truth. The voice that whispers you are your worst mistake. That nothing will ever change.

Ash is what remains after the fire. So the question is simple: What survives the fire? What, in your life, would turn to ash if God touched it? And what would remain? Your treasure? Your heart? Jesus says, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." So maybe our ashes are honesty and freedom. They say: Live now. Forgive now. Love now. Resist the accuser now. Practice mercy now. Because you are dust. So there is no time to hurry. No time to hoard. No time to perform. No time to delay love. You're gonna die. Yes. But the gospel proclaims: The accuser does not win. The wilderness is not forever. The Father sees in secret. The Spirit is at work.

Ash Wednesday is not a dead end. It is the first step on a long road-a road that winds through wilderness and honesty and hunger, and leads, slowly and resolutely and ultimately, to an empty tomb. So wear the ashes. Let them humble you. Let them free you. Descend. Tell the truth. Love like a people who know their days are numbered.

You are dust. And to dust you shall return. You're gonna die. Thanks be to God.