

Ash Wednesday is a pretty weird holiday. In preparation for the most joyous day in the Christian year, we've got a day of mourning and repentance and a season of fasting. We do this ritual tonight with ashes on our foreheads that alludes to our Baptism and our death all at once. And then we come to this weird piece of Scripture tonight talking about all the wrong ways to do all the right things. So what's the deal?

A few years ago I played in the praise band for the contemporary worship service at First Baptist. And a group of us in the band began a young adult discussion group. We would meet after the service and go out to eat and talk about something different every week, sometimes the topic of the service we'd just left, or something controversial in the news about the political or religious world around us.

And this one Sunday night, sometime during the summer, about as far away from Ash Wednesday as you can get in the calendar, Mason Smith, the pastor at the time, did a really meaningful service of Imposition of Ashes. It wasn't Ash Wednesday but it went with what he was teaching that night. And after the service, our group met and decided we were going to go to Applebee's that night for our discussion. My friend Adam said he was going to stop at home for a minute and he would meet us there, so the rest of us went ahead to the restaurant.

It was past dinnertime on a Sunday night and football season hadn't started yet, so the place wasn't very busy when we walked in. And our hostess had some time to talk to us and to notice the crosses, so after she'd gone through asking how many were in our party and seating us, she stayed at the table for a moment to ask about the funny marks on our faces. We were all actually a little embarrassed and self-conscious, which is ironic considering how many future missionaries and church staff were in that group. But we were self-conscious. We had put on those crosses as part of a deeply personal worship experience and had left them on out of nothing more than really neglecting to remember we were headed out in public. We weren't asking for any attention with them, we just hadn't realized we were inviting it.

But once the surprise wore off, it became a chance to talk with her, and then our waiter, and then even the cook who came out to see what was going on. It became this missional opportunity in which that they were eager to participate because they realized we weren't trying to be obnoxious about our faith, we were just trying to live it out.

The most memorable part of the evening was when Adam, who had told us he'd meet us there, finally showed up. We'd expected a call to ask where in the building we were. But he just appeared at our table. Another of our group said to him, "Oh, you found us!" to which he replied "Are you kidding? I

walked in with this cross on my forehead and the hostess just said to me “Your friends are in the back.” Our discussion topic that night became “Wouldn’t it be great if our faith was that visible all the time?”

And yes, yes it would. If that’s what is really visible. Our faith, our love for God, what’s in our hearts. Because that’s what Jesus is getting into in our passage from Matthew. Not the rules for what we’re doing. But the “why?”. We’re not told “Don’t practice your righteousness in front of others.” We’re told “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others *to be seen by them.*”

Ash Wednesday is all about the why. The symbols matter. The service matters. Our participation matters. But our hearts matter more.

This past weekend I had the opportunity to go on a ski trip with 7 other adults and 30 youth from our congregation and from Christ Episcopal Church. Now our youth for the most part have spent at least a year and a half with me. They know me, they get my sense of humor, they understand my expectations for them. Some of the kids from the other group spent the weekend trying to figure me out.

After snowboarding all day Saturday and leading vespers Saturday night, I was in my bed pretty early reading and watching movies on my iPad just waiting for “lights out” to roll around at 11:00. At about 10:55 I got up to walk out to the living room to give the boys in my house head’s-up that they needed to be in their rooms in just a few minutes. They were watching ESPN and listening to music at a pretty low volume, which was fine.

As I came down the short hallway, one of the boys from the other group, who shall remain nameless, heard me coming and he scurried across the couch and hit the “pause” button on his iPod. And so the room was now really quiet and the boys are staring up at me expectantly. I knew he hadn’t been afraid the volume of the speakers or the TV would wake me up, so I correctly guessed that he was worried about the content of the music he’d just turned off. So I gave him a couple of heartbeats to freak out, and then I asked him, “Are you worried you’re going to offend me?” And he looked up me with these wide eyes and said, “...yes.”

I appreciated his awareness that his choice of music was not necessarily appropriate. I would have been prouder of him if he’d just not been listening to it in the first place. But I also wasn’t going to pour out wrath and judgment on this student who was both repentant and otherwise functioning completely within my will for him.

Sometimes we just need to get busted that. We need to realize that the image we’re projecting isn’t the one we want, or what God wants of us. We should be reminded that our hearts and our actions should match.

The other scripture for Ash Wednesday is from Joel chapter 2. It says ¹²“**Even now,**” declares the LORD, “**return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.**” ¹³ **Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.** Rend your heart and not your garments. Because as we return to God with fasting and weeping and mourning, it is the sincerity of our actions that He sees and values.

We are a sinful and broken people. And in repentance tonight we are here tonight to recognize it; to put on ashes, a symbol of death and mourning. But we put them on in the form of the cross, a symbol of Christ’s defeat of death.

You probably won’t get this entire blessing as you come forward this evening, because it’s a mouthful when there’s a whole line of people. But in the traditional words of the Ash Wednesday service, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Repent, and believe the Gospel.”