

# *Imposition*

*II Corinthians 5:20-6:10; Psalms 51:1-17*

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I think this is the first time we have imposed ashes at First Church, or if not, it is at least the first time I have done so here. I do this realizing that imposing ashes, as it is called in the liturgy of the church, is a new thing in our midst. It is considered by many as a “Catholic” or an “Episcopal” rite and not very Presbyterian in nature. In reality, the order for this service comes directly from the *Book of Common Worship* of the Presbyterian Church, the approved source for liturgical use in our church for the past decade. And today many Presbyterian churches across the city and the nation will impose ashes in services just like this one.

More importantly, the observance of Ash Wednesday and the imposition of ashes have a much longer history than the developments of the past decade in Reformed worship. Using ashes as a sign of repentance is an ancient practice, often mentioned in the Bible. Nineveh responded to the prophet Jonah’s call for repentance by putting on sackcloth and *sitting* in ashes (Jonah 3:5-9). And we thought a small sign of ashes on the forehead was ostentatious. Sitting in ashes! Explain that to your boss!

Job at the end of his trials repents before God with dust and *ashes* (Job 42:6). Jeremiah calls for Israel’s repentance by putting on sackcloth and *rolling in ashes* (Jeremiah 6:26). And Jesus reproaches the cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida, Tyre and Sidon and Capernaum for their lack of repentance, their unwillingness to *put on* ashes (as he said) and turn to God (Matthew 11:21ff). The early Christians adopted the use of ashes from Jewish practice as an external mark of penitence.

Far from being simply a practice of the more liturgically formal churches, the imposition of ashes takes us much farther back, to our *biblical* roots, to our sourcebook and standard of faith and practice, the Bible. Traditionally, the ashes used for imposition on Ash Wednesday are taken from the palms of the previous year’s Palm Sunday, burned, and mixed with oil to make the dust that is used in this service.

Ashes symbolize several elements of our lives. They remind us of the price of our sin. In Genesis, God tells Adam for the first time that he will die: “Dust you are, and to dust you shall return.” It must have been a stunning announcement for Adam, like that time when as children it suddenly dawns on us that we too are going to die. When the ashes are imposed, the tradition is to repeat that phrase, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Believe it or not, the ashes also represent cleansing. In the ancient world, ash was used in the absence of soap. And we apply the ash to the forehead as a substitute for water and as a reminder of our baptism. Ashes remind us of the shortness of human life. At the funeral service, the words said at the graveside are “earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” a solemn reminder that even our bodies are impermanent.

Finally, ashes are a symbol of our need to repent, confess our sins, and return to God, perhaps the earliest and most biblical reason for using ashes at all. In that sense, the ashes remind us that nothing in this life is permanent. Or as my friend Cliff Swartz,

a professor at Stony Brook University, used to say, “On the day I die, all my projects will be incomplete.”

For the longest time we Presbyterians got away from imposing ashes. In the Reformation, Zwingli and some of the other reformers were particularly opposed to the idea of using any rituals that did not appeal to reason and intellect. Preaching was considered to be Christian education, and signs of the cross, even religious paintings, were considered anathema. Zwingli had the paintings on the walls of his church in Zurich whitewashed for fear of any representation of God that might appeal to superstition. It was a bleak time for the mystery and the inexplicable of our faith. We overcame many such excesses of the Reformation, but imposing ashes took longer, until the latter part of the twentieth century, for many Presbyterians to recover.

I wonder if one of the reasons for that may not have been simply because of our forebears’ fear of superstition. But also because the ashes remind us of our mortality, a mortality and vulnerability that we try to keep at bay, and out of our minds.

There is an episode of the *Golden Girls* in which Dorothy has something wrong with her. She goes to a series of doctors who try to diagnose her problem, but it eludes them, and several even suggest that it is psychosomatic. Dorothy visits her neighbor and friend, Dr. Harry Weston, and asks him to look at her chart, the record of all the medical tests she has taken. Harry reads it carefully. Finally Dorothy asks him, “Am I going to die, Harry?” And Dr. Weston answers, “*Without a doubt*. Sooner or later, you’re going to die. But I doubt you will die of whatever this is.”

Over the years, when I have visited in the hospital with parishioners, and when I myself have been a patient, I have always realized that the elephant in the room about which we are all reluctant to speak is the persistent question, “Am I going to die?” And like the response Harry gives Dorothy, the answer is “*Without a doubt*, sooner or later you and I are going to die.”

It is a reminder none of us likes to hear. In fact it’s an *imposition* to hear it. The reminder of our mortality *imposes* itself into our life, like an unwelcome visitor. We keep death at bay by distracting ourselves, by going shopping, watching television, seeing the latest movie and play and concert, and logging onto the internet for interminable hours chatting with others we don’t know yet acting as if we do. We work from seven in the morning until ten at night, and sometimes overnight, and slip a briefcase under the pew on Sunday morning because we are headed to the office after the service. We build up our bank account as an insurance policy against Old Scratch, as if somehow if we have enough of that security we will have security of the soul as well. But Scratch knows how to get to us anyway and take everything we treasure, just when we thought we were safe.

Of course we don’t like to think about the dust that we are, the sin that stands between us and God, the earthliness and humanity of our frame, our transitory dust that blows away one day. We try to convince ourselves that we are invulnerable, invincible, immortal—that this moment is forever.

This past week I came smack-dab into the face of this mortality issue. I had occasion to return a call to my former church in Delaware and to try and reach one of the former pastors with whom I had worked there. There is a new receptionist at the phone in that church, a person added to the staff since I left. I have dreaded somewhat calling that church, in the past, because I was so well known and the receptionist always knew my voice and would hold me up by asking how things were going here

and how was I doing, and did I like New York, and all that. And I just wanted to have her pass me on to the person I called. But there's a new person there now, and the new person does not know me.

"May I speak to Anne," I asked. "I'll pass you through," the new receptionist said. "May I ask who's calling?" she inquired. "Jon Walton," I said with some hesitancy, sure she would recognize my name and say, "Oh I've heard so much about you" and "How do you like New York?" and "How are things going there?" and all that. But instead she repeated back my name, "Jon Walton," completely disinterested. "Just a moment." I got Anne's voicemail, but I also got a dose of reality. In a moment of time, in that lack of recognition, I realized that life moves on. Others come and take our place, and we will not always be remembered. Somebody else moves into the apartment we leave. Somebody else takes our job after us. Somebody else comes next, and we are reminded that we are dust and to dust we shall return.

"I have been thinking a lot about death, these days," a man with HIV told me recently. And, of course, we all do, whether it is conscious or not, think about death—when we hear the reports on the morning news that a suicide bomber has taken a few more lives in Fallujah or Mosul, or that a soldier has been killed overnight in a mortar attack, all this as we, unaffected, spread the jam on our morning toast. A teenager on a wrestling team in Long Island is killed the night of his team's championship match, and here in the city a truck kills two boys, ten and eleven, on their way home from school. Even the young must die. And we try to pretend we don't care. But we do, even when we don't allow ourselves to care. We notice.

We notice death when we hear about the friend who is battling cancer, or see the neighbor in the elevator with a wrap around her head, the loss of hair a side effect of chemotherapy. We notice the shadow of death with the pain in the shoulder, and the look in the mirror in the morning and all those gathering wrinkles. We notice it, even though we won't admit it. We notice it.

Ash Wednesday reminds us of two things, that we are dust and to dust we shall return. How is it the psalmist puts it? "The days of our years are threescore years and ten; ...for it is soon cut off, and we fly away." We fly away.

And the ashes remind us that we are fallen and we can't get up on our own. We need God's help. We need God's forgiveness for our sin. And we need God's love, like a mother who gathers her children to her to nurture and protect them.

That is finally the hope that is scratched in the ash on our foreheads, that God's love has reached all the way to earth, to the dust from which we have been made, and made of the dust the peace of heart and spirit that we seek. Made with tender mercy and loving care, just like that dust God took in hand to shape the first creatures, man and woman. There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. We may be dust, but dust that we are, we are loved—loved, made whole, and made new by the resurrection of Jesus, who has shown us in his death and resurrection that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Nothing can separate us from God's love. That is the secret scratched in the ash and imposed on our foreheads. Nothing can separate us from God's love.