

Why Ashes Matter

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Her name was Amma, and she was seven years old. For four days she walked around the house with a great big green smudge on her forehead. After her mother finally sent her in for a good scrubbing, she returned all clean and freshly dressed from her shower... with another big green spot on her forehead.

Her mother could stay silent no longer. "I give up," she said. "What's going on with the green blob?"

Amma looked up at her and said, "I'm a *child of God*, Mom." Pointing to her forehead she further explained, "My green is to *remember*. So I can be brave."

Amma, it seemed, was marking herself, "recreating Ash Wednesday every morning." Her mother later reflected that the girl was "making herself a sacrament, which is an outward reminder of an invisible truth. Every morning she's saying to herself and the world: I'm God's. So I can be brave."¹

I am not sure how children become prophets, but it seems to happen all the time. It certainly did with little Amma. It might seem counterintuitive to think that being marked with ashes—a sign of our sure and impending death—would be anything like good news. But in fact, Amma had it right. To be marked with ashes is, yes, to be reminded of our mortality, which is also to be reminded that we are not on this watery orb alone. To be marked with ashes is to remember that we are claimed by the one who became one with us in death, so that we might also become one with him in life.

Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent, a season of repentance. The appointed texts are the same every year: a prophet's call to fasting; Psalm 51, the quintessential psalm of confession; Paul's exhortation to be reconciled to God in 2 Corinthians; and a call to true piety from Matthew 6. The point is not to make a show of contrition, but to come to terms with our need for God and to repent—to turn away from our self-sufficient, self-satisfied, self-centered ways and turn to the way of the gospel which, of course, means turning toward other people with compassion and care, food and water, as much justice as we can muster. In short, it means to pay attention.

Worship on Ash Wednesday takes on a somber tone as we hear the call to repentance and face up to the fact that we will one day die. Both of these elements remind us of our profound need for God. Our songs and prayers express our contrition, plead for Christ's mercy, and ask for the Spirit to change our hearts, because we are unable to do it alone. At the heart of the service is the simple ritual of marking one another with ashes. Some of us may want to settle for using "ashes" as a metaphor, since making them (or finding them) can be difficult. Plus, ashes are dirty. But I urge you not to only talk about them. Smear them. They may be too crumbly or too oily or too messy. It really doesn't matter. And be sure to make the cross right in the middle of each other's foreheads, not on the hands. It makes a difference to see the truth on another person's face—to see our own mortality reflected on the face of another. It matters that we are literally marked as Christ's own, just as we were in baptism. It matters that we acknowledge our mortality before we start on the path to celebrating our immortality on Easter.

This is a countercultural thing we do as a church. Our culture does not like to speak of weakness, much less death. We do not want to be reminded that we cannot, in the end, do one blessed thing to save ourselves from despair or destruction.

Of course, what sounds like bad news is very good news. At one level, it can be sheer relief to acknowledge our weakness. We spend so much time trying to convince ourselves and others that we have got this thing called life under control. We can do this! Until we can't. One hospital chaplain tells of offering ashes to medical personnel all throughout the day, whenever they were on breaks. "It was a relief, even for a lot of the docs, I think," he recalled. "All this effort goes into looking good, and working hard, and pretending you're in charge of life and death. What a relief to have a day when you're just another person with a smudge of dirt on your head."²

Another chaplain in the same hospital carried ashes to the beds of patients who were too sick to come to the chapel. Quietly, she would enter each room and mark the heads of the dying. "Remember you are dust," she told them, "And to dust you shall return."³ What a blessing to stare one's mortality in the face, knowing that you have been claimed by the God who formed you from dust in the first place.

In the sanctuary of St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco, people mark one another with ashy crosses. "Forgive me, a sinner," one says, and another replies, "God forgives you. Forgive me a sinner." "God forgives you." A mother leans down to ask forgiveness from her young son; two women who barely know each other assure one another of God's forgiveness. An older couple, long married, hold hands and look silently into each other's eyes, finally exchanging the words that must have held a lifetime of broken promises and reconciliations.

Most of us will receive ashes in our familiar sanctuaries at the beginning of the next Lenten season. Like Amma, I will wear a smudge and remember that I am a child of God. I will look at other smudged faces and remember that they, too, are claimed by the same God, and maybe, at least for a time, my repentance will be real, and I will treat them as if they are the blessed children of God that they are.

Notes

1 Glennon Doyle Melton, "The Gift of the Green Blob," at Momastery: Truth Tellers and Hope Spreaders, August 4, 2015, <http://momastery.com/blog/2015/08/04/the-gift-of-the-green-blob/> (accessed October 4, 2015).

2 Sara Miles, *City of God: Faith in the Streets* (New York: Jericho Books, 2014), 37.

3 Ibid.