

Ash Wednesday

My friend asked me last week where the ashes come from that we use today?

Like, is there an Ash Aisle at Walmart?

Or do you raid the neighbors charcoal grill?

No, the ashes come from the burned palm leaves that we blessed on Palm Sunday.

Why do we do that?

Well, the ashes are here to remind us that we are dust, and to dust shall we return.

They are a reminder that we are mortal.

That the one certainty in life, something even more certain than taxes, is that we each of us shall die.

Which we all sort of realize, except for that little voice that says, "Maybe I'll be the exception!"

The Palm Sunday branches are used to make the ashes as a reminder that even the best person who ever lived — died.

Why remind ourselves every year of our own mortality?

Well, there's lots of reasons.

For one, we live in a youth-centered culture.

Whether it's botox or plastic surgery, Just For Men hair coloring or viagra, the denial of aging and all that it brings is probably the greatest bit of propaganda that Madison Avenue has ever created.

And the other side of our youth culture coin is our persistent denial of death.

Which we see far too often in our healthcare system where too many healthcare professionals treat death as an unmitigated disaster.

A personal failure.

Rather than what it actually is: a normal and inevitable part of life.

We see it in the way we treat the dying; sending them into ICU's rather than comforting them at home.

We no longer bathe or dress our dead.

That's left up to professionals, who do what they do in far away places, unseen and unaided by those who loved the deceased.

Which brings us to a discussion that happens every year in our diocese about the imposition of ashes.

Some say that because today's gospel admonishes us not to "parade our piety," we ought not wear the mark of the ashes on our foreheads.

Some say, don't get them at all.

While others advise, sprinkle them on your head so you know you get them, but no one else does.

Which kind of fits with a view of Christianity that says: what really matters is my personal salvation.

It's a "me and you Jesus" thing rather than a community thing.

Truth be told, the emphasis on personal salvation is far more about American individualism than it is about the gospels.

After all, Jesus doesn't say: "I've come to save Tom, Dick and Mary."

Jesus says, always and everywhere, "I've come to save the world."

Meaning, the community counts.

We're all in this together.

And so, when we receive the ashes on our foreheads, and walk around town or at work or at home, we're witnessing to something that really matters.

Those ashes say, to the broader anti-aging anti-death culture that we are surrounded by: "You're wrong."

Quite wrong.

Those ashes say, "you can't really know how to live until you come to grips with dying."

Because, if we can successfully pretend that there's no death, then chasing after fortune, fame and power becomes the be all and end all of life.

She who dies with the most toys, wins!

But when we put on our grown up pants and face up to our own mortality, the magnificent attributes that are truly human are allowed to blossom and grow.

Attributes of patience and compassion, of mercy and forgiveness. If we none of us get out of this life alive, then the stuff that matters is not the stuff we buy and consume, it's the stuff that connects us to one another.

The stuff of joy and laughter and humility.

And here's the thing, we humans need signs and symbols.

It's perhaps the most uniquely human characteristic.

And the question is not whether we WILL seek out and embrace signs and symbols.

The only question is, which ones?

Will they be foreheads smeared with the ashes of mortality?

Or MAGA hats screaming out for white nationalism?

And because of that, I for one hope you will come up, kneel at the altar, and receive the imposition of these ashes on your foreheads, for all to see.

I hope you will wear them with the humility they are intended to reflect and elicit.

We are mortal, made from the earth, and to the earth shall we return.

Yet even at the grave, our song remains: Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia!

Because but for the grace of God, we are all of us nothing more than walking piles of future dirt.

But for the grace of God.

It's that grace that compels us to wear these ashes.

It's that grace that we proclaim to the larger society, through the silent witness of these ashes.

And it's that grace, when all is said and done, that brings everyone home.

+amen.