

Going to Ash Wednesday service is a bit like attending your own funeral. And there's usually two ways in which funerals are handled. One way is to deny that a death has occurred. We call it a "celebration of life," and by focusing on the past we often ignore the present reality literally lying right in front of us. We might talk about how great a person the deceased was. Laud their accomplishments and relationships. Even focus on their tastes and interests. Like, "Uncle Jim dedicated his life to his beloved team, the Green Bay Packers." Or, "Cousin Sally was such an avid collector of porcelain keepsakes." Or, "We're so proud of our good friend Bob, who fulfilled his lifelong dream of playing local fairs as a one-man band." But the problem with doing things that way is that at best it's a distraction, a diversion away from the fact that something terrible has fallen upon a dear loved one.

Another way to deal with it, apart from pretending like a death never happened, is to act like it really isn't so bad. *It's just a part of life, we say. We're caught up in the circle of life.* We make it sound natural, regular, ordinary; as if it wasn't a big deal. In her novel, *A Thousand Acres*, Jane Smiley writes about the goodness of her farmland.

"For millennia, water lay over the land. Untold generations of water plants, birds, animals, [and] insects lived, shed bits of themselves, and died. . . . It all drifted down, lazily, in the warm, soupy water—leaves, seeds, feathers, scales, flesh, bones, petals, pollen—then mixed with the saturated soil below and became, itself, soil. They were the soil, and the soil was the treasure."

While we can try to poeticize death to sound sweet, pretty, even nice, that only works as long as it's happening to the other guy. But when it's you, then all of a sudden that becomes a hard sell.

We can dress up death, or pretend it won't happen to us—but that never works. Ash Wednesday confronts us with the fact that nobody here in the room gets out of this world alive. The wages of sin is death. Adam was warned, "Eat that forbidden fruit and you'll die." He did, and so he died. And we do too, so today we get told, "From dust you came, and to dust you shall return."

One Presbyterian minister up in Pennsylvania used to put a brass bowl on his office desk of leftover ashes from the Ash Wednesday service. When church members would stop by his office, many of them would look into that bowl in horror and ask, "Whose ashes are you keeping on your desk?" And straight-faced, the pastor would answer, "All of ours!"

Speaking of ashes, my father recently emailed me some declassified photos from the 9/11 attacks. They're a series of aerial shots that show the extent of the devastation. What I never realized was how far blocks and blocks and blocks, for miles and miles all around where the twin towers once stood, it was nothing but ashes. Passersby were covered with ash; cars were covered with ash; even tall buildings were covered. Some even described it like it was snowing. It was like much of New York City was nothing but an ash heap—all that remained of the World Trade Center and the thousands of lives lost inside. Such a sober reminder of just how fleeting, how fragile, how finite all of us really are.

Several weeks after that terrible tragedy, there was a Port Authority policeman being interviewed on the radio. As he spoke, you could hear the groaning of dump trucks in the background. There was a hissing and popping of cutting torches turned on steel. Thirty of his friends had died on September 11, the officer explained, which was why he couldn't stay away from the site.

When the reporter asked him to describe the scene for those who were listening, he talked about the relief workers who were sifting through the rubble and debris. They'd carry two handfuls at a time over to a tarp where they would search for anything recognizably human. But what struck him most, the policeman said, was their utter reverence for what they carried in their hands. "It's nothing but ashes," he said, "and yet you should see how they touch it." . . . "Nothing but ashes . . . yet you should see how they touch it."

Maybe that has the power to turn this Ash Wednesday inside out. Maybe today's not so much about the poverty of the flesh—how each of us is like dust in the wind—but about the holiness of ashes, which are indeed worthy of great

reverence. Maybe that's why Christians aren't afraid to face funerals head on. As the family gathers by the grave, the pastor places his hand on the head of the casket and says, "May God the Father, who created this body; may God the Son, who by His blood redeemed this body; may God the Holy Spirit, who by Holy Baptism sanctified this body to be His temple, keep these remains to the day of the resurrection of all flesh."

God is the potter, we are the clay. With profound love and great detail He has molded each one of us. Nothing else in all of creation was handmade, yet God treated us with special care. From the ground was Adam taken, and God breathed life into Him. The life that resided deep within his Creator's chest, closest to His Father's heart, is what fills up humanity's hollowness. Flesh and bone made sacred by the Spirit.

It is into that same dust that God breathes Himself again. Only, in the person of *Jesus Christ* the fullness of the Godhead is pleased to dwell. He is the Word made flesh, the Lord incarnate. And it is with such dust that God gets Himself mixed up. He joins Himself to humanity, unites Himself to flesh.

From His head to His toes, He sanctifies the body. Every second of our lives gets consecrated—from birth to death. Into the greatest joys and the deepest pain, God Himself enters. Nothing is strange to Him, because He has experienced everything firsthand. Taken down from the cross, He's even laid in the dust of the earth, making it holy.

Because our Lord has become dust, you and I, we're not just dust . . . no, we are *dust!* God reached His hands into that tomb on Easter morning, and scooping up the dust of the new man He breathed life back into Him again! God got His hands under the dust of Jesus and raised Him up from the dead! And it is that dust—our dust—that has ascended into heaven and now sits at the right hand of the Father. It is such dust that God Himself holds so dear.

Already, the Easter light at the end of Lent's tunnel is breaking through! If you know where this journey is headed, then today you and I have no reason to grieve! Today is not about death; but about the life to come! It's not about destruction, but about re-creation! It's not about the end, but about new beginnings! It's about saying goodbye to mortality, and saying hello to immortality! You and I, we might be dust, but . . . well, we've seen what God can do with dust!