

A Catholic priest working in an inner city was walking down an alley one evening on his way home when a young man came down the alley behind him and poked a knife against his back. "Give me your money," the young man said.

The priest opened his jacket and reached into an inner pocket to remove his wallet, exposing his clerical collar. "Oh, I'm sorry, Father," said the young man, "I didn't see your collar. I don't want YOUR money."

Trembling from the scare, the priest removed a cigar from his shirt pocket and offered it to the young man. "Here," he said. "Have a cigar."

"Oh, no, I can't do that," the young man replied, "I gave them up for Lent."

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The Rev. Timothy J. Kennedy tells a wonderful true story that is perfect for Ash Wednesday. It was told to him by a colleague, Pastor Chris Mietlowski. It concerned a baptism that Mietlowski once performed on an infant named Eric. Mietlowski took Eric in his arms and traced the cross of Christ on Eric's forehead using a special anointing oil.

Following worship, Eric's family celebrated with a big backyard party. Family and friends ate burgers and chips and played volleyball under a summer sun. Eric, being only six months old, was left to nap in his backyard stroller. When Mom got him up, whoops. Basted on Eric's forehead was the image of the cross. Mom had forgotten to wash Eric's face following his baptism, and the oil that the pastor had traced onto his forehead acted the opposite of a sun screen. The Cross of Christ was imprinted on Eric's forehead. "For several weeks until it completely disappeared," says Rev. Kennedy, "that cross was a wonderful reminder as to the meaning of Baptism and a reminder that the Cross of Jesus was 'written' upon Eric's forehead."

And what a powerful witness it was, says Rev. Kennedy. "Eric's Mom and Dad had to explain the cross to the pediatrician, to the neighbors, to the stranger in the grocery store. For a few weeks, Eric was nothing less than a [living] children's sermon. It was only a bit of a sunburn to be sure, but [it was] the best basting a child can have to be marked with the cross of Christ! And why not? That cross is to be the foundation of that child's life."

If I read the little book of Joel right, God's desire is not that we wear a cross on our forehead, but that it be basted on our hearts. "Rend your heart and not your garments," says Joel 2:23. That's much harder to do, isn't it? It's much easier to rend your clothes than to rend your heart. It's much easier to wear a cross around your neck than it is to bear it daily in everything you do.

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When I was in grade school, I remember Ash Wednesday as a melancholy day. The sisters who taught us were unusually somber and whispery to us that day. It felt like Ash Wednesday, with its marked foreheads and meager meals, signaled the beginning of a long period of giving up candy – and some feeling that we were all lost.

But many decades later, a look at today's readings changes my perspective and seems to invite us into a hopeful joy. God invites us to "return to me with your whole heart" and we ask God in return to "create a clean heart for me and a steadfast spirit renew within me."

Rather than being melancholy, Lent invites us into a deep joy, for we are known by God as imperfect people but we are loved by God as forgiven. The deeply forgiving love God extends to us is like an invitation to renew our relationship with God.

Yes, it might be a period of simplicity, paring down and clearing away the things that are getting in the way between us and God. Lent can be a time to take a clear-eyed look at ourselves and honestly see who we are, just as God does. But it's a time of great hope, as we realize how much God longs for a relationship with us.

That doesn't mean we focus on us and our failings, but we can look at the way our lack of freedom gets in the way of our relationships with God. An honest look at ourselves as flawed creatures of God doesn't mean we give up.

Rather we can rejoice in knowing that there is nothing we have done, no act or way of life, no hidden sin so deeply tucked away in our souls, that God does not forgive in us.

Can we imagine the next six weeks as time to spend with one who loves us so much, who forgives and comforts us and rejoices in our love? And isn't that celebration of love even deeper and more joyful if we have been separated from God for a while?

Today many of us will have our foreheads marked by a cross of ashes. It is a shocking symbol of our own mortality and of the sacrifice Jesus made for us with his death. It is also a public marking that reminds us - and others - of God's message to us, "I created you for myself and gave you my only son to free you from sin and death. Even now, I am calling you, drawing you closer to myself so that someday, I can celebrate with you a never ending banquet of love."

The ashes on our forehead are more than a symbol of our own mortality. They are a sign of God fighting for our freedom from this world, liberating us from the clutches of so many things that drag us away from God.

Today Jesus is calling us to himself in an ever-deeper way, inviting us into his endless forgiveness and asking us to return to his loving embrace. With tears of joy, we can accept his outstretched arms. When I was a girl my sense of Ash Wednesday was that we were lost. Now I see that we are found! (*Maureen McCann Waldron*)