

ASH WEDNESDAY HOMILY
2011

Ash Wednesday is a strange day.
The Gospel tells us NOT to be like the hypocrites and look like we're fasting.
And what do we go and do?
We go and put ASHES on our foreheads—like the hypocrites.
I don't know about you, but I spend the rest of the day worrying about the ashes!
Should I wipe them off or not wipe them off?
If I do, what can I wipe them off with?
Can I just use a tissue and then throw blessed ashes in the garbage?
And if I don't, do I look like I'm a holier-than-thou Christian?
The Pacific Northwest, afterall, isn't very friendly to those who go to church!
Most years, I try to leave them on my forehead
and then I usually just accidentally rub them off my forehead later anyway!

But instead of focusing on the **ASHES**, let's focus on the **SHAPE** of the ashes.
We make them in the sign of the cross.
Maybe we do that because that's just how Catholics do things: crosses everywhere.
When we enter church with holy water, at the beginning and end of prayer, throughout the Mass.
In all cases, the cross takes us back to Christ.
This cross of ashes takes us back to Christ:
HIS cross, *his* passion and death, and of course *his* resurrection.
And it takes us back to our baptism,
when our foreheads were traced with a the sign of the cross
and when we entered into Christ's death and resurrection in the waters of baptism.

And whatever we do this Lent,
it should help us enter more closely into the passion and death of Jesus,
so that we can better celebrate new life with him on Easter.
All of this—Lent, Easter, and especially Christ's death and resurrection—is for us, for you, for me.
To anyone who suffers from a lack of self-worth, who feels unloved,
who is ashamed about who they are, who can't let go...
these are powerful, healing words.
Christ's death and resurrection is for us, because God loves us.
The single, most powerful spiritual insight we can ever have
is that God loves us, that God loves all of our brothers and sisters,
that God loves all of creation,
that God gives us hope and new life.

So that's the big picture.

But I'd be remiss not to dig into the scriptures and open it a little deeper and talk about what you and I can do during Lent.

The Gospel gives us some pretty clear guidance and suggestions about prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

Prayer: to improve our relationship with God.

Fasting: to help us sharpen our understanding of our very selves and what we hunger for in life.

Almsgiving: to help us enter more deeply into relationship with others, especially the poor and the suffering—

who are our brothers and sisters, both here in downtown Seattle and around the world.

One phrase in today's Gospel really spoke to me.

Jesus told us to go to our *inner room* to pray.

He probably meant the inner room of our home, our house or condo, a place where there are no distractions from the outer world.

But St. Teresa of Avila tells us there's another inner room.

Teresa was a Spanish mystic from the 16th Century, who's now revered as a Doctor of a Church.

In one of her visions, she saw an "Interior Castle" that's deep inside each of us.

Deep inside of each of us. An *inner room*.

Where God is waiting for us, all the time. Just God.

We just have to go there to find God.

Which is not an easy task!

Teresa describes six outer rooms where most people get stuck, where there are many distractions and temptations.

But if we make it to our "inner room"..... that's where God is!

Therefore, let me offer **three** suggestions for Lent about how we can find this *inner room*.

For pick one, or two or, hopefully, all three of them.

My first suggestion is distraction-free time alone with God. Maybe 20 minutes a day.

20 minutes can be hard to find. Maybe it means shutting off the music and radio on your commute.

Or turning off your cell phone for a while.

Maybe take a morning or evening walk. Or spend time in church in our Blessed Sacrament Chapel.

Even 20 minutes a day can help me be more aware of who I am,

what God is saying to me,

and how I can share God's hope and love with the world.

My second suggestion is to spend 1 hour a week with a friend or family member.

1 person for each of the 6 weeks of Lent.

But not just any friend or family member, but a very very close person--

One of those very few people you might let into your personal "inner room."

Perhaps it's your spouse or partner, perhaps it's someone you don't see very often,
or perhaps the good friend or family member that you might take too often for granted.

Just make sure it's someone you care about and who cares about you!

How hard is it for us as busy people not to be in touch with those who mean so much to us!

Don't let a Facebook update and a text message replace human contact.

Go for a walk, go for a cup of coffee, but be present, for 1 hour, to the person in front of you.

And I'll give you two "outs":

1. If you're new to Seattle, phone calls will suffice. Remember most cell phone calls are free on weekends!

2. Maybe it's a person who you don't let into your "inner room," but they need to let you into theirs.
And because of recent sickness, or loss, or divorce or separation, they really need a friend to listen.

Third, give of yourself in service,
to each other.

Either here at Christ Our Hope

at your own parish,

at any of the many downtown ministries and social services organizations.

At least once during Lent!

Service to others in humility and love deepens our sense of connection to each other.

It makes us aware of the Christ in our "inner room"

and aware of Christ in others—even those very different from us.

We become aware of how incredibly fragile we are as human beings
and for that reason how beautiful and precious human life is.

There you go: Three suggestions to deepen the sense of our personhood
and that of others

—to journey into our "inner room" —

(1) 20 minutes each day for solitude, reflection and prayer

(2) one hour each week with someone you care about,

and (3) time for service to others --

three suggestions to deepen our sense of discipleship.

With God's help, we will come to a deeper sense of the Christ in ourselves, in our *inner room*,
and in each other.

Where you are, there Christ is,

and where Christ is, there will be the Paschal Mystery.

Not only death on a cross, but also new life, on Easter!