

Homily for Ash Wednesday

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

We gather on Ash Wednesday this year, as we do every year, to continue an ancient tradition of the Christian Church in marking ourselves with ashes from the palm fronds that were lifted up by us the previous Palm Sunday as we joined together in shouting our Hallelujahs in praise. Last year, however, there were no shouts of praise on Palm Sunday, nor were there palm fronds lifted in celebration, as we did not gather in person to sing our Hallelujahs, but hunkered down at home, hoping to slow the spread of a deadly virus. It has been a year now that we've been struggling against the coronavirus and the terrible disease it causes. Some of us have been made ill by it. Almost half a million people just in our own country have gone to the grave because of it, including many people that we loved.

And so we gather this Ash Wednesday already surrounded each day by reminders of the fragility of our bodies and the inevitability that our bodies, which are merely made of the stuff of the earth, shall surely return to the earth. But we still mark ourselves, not just to be reminded of this shared reality, but to be reminded of another common truth: Our spirits, which are part of the human whole, are also fragile and broken and deeply in need of God's grace, especially in times of trouble or grief, such as those we find ourselves in now.

We do not mark ourselves to be seen by others as being holy or pious, as Jesus teaches us in our lesson from the gospel, we

ought not make a show of our spiritual practices to be praised by others. These smudges that we are about to place upon ourselves are not really signs of being holy at all; rather, they are visible markers that we are spiritually holey (h-o-l-e-y), and that no matter how whole we are as people, we are all still spiritually riddled with holes, pits, and gaps, that can only be filled by God.

But God's love for us everlasting and perfect, and God graciously and patiently fills the gaps, meeting our need and moving us toward wholeness.

So, this year, let the smudge you receive remind you not only of your brokenness, but your blessedness: You are a creature of the earth, but also a beloved child of God, who smudges upon you goodness and blessings beyond your comprehension. O God, may the smudges of your grace be upon all now. Amen.