

February 25, 2009, 12:05 p.m.

Ash Wednesday, Year B

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

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“What are you giving up for Lent?” That was the question asked of me by my fellow Episcopalian and Roman Catholic friends each Lent when I was growing up. Sometimes we get caught up in Ash Wednesday and the Lenten season as a remorseful time of sacrifice, a time of no joy, when we slog through the days, and give up something we love, reminding us of the sacrifices that we must make in order to please God, somehow. It is almost a time honored tradition of giving up certain routines in our lives, somehow hoping that the act of self-denial in and of itself will please God.

I think we believe there is more to Ash Wednesday, there is more to Lent than this, but we can get overly technical about it all, breaking down today's Gospel into three parts, pointing out the three areas of discipline mentioned by Jesus: prayer, fasting, and giving alms, all in private, so as not to seek self glorification. But, if we are following these instructions for the sake of following them, or for the sake of being better than the group of hypocrites, or for the sake of following an annual ritual, then we are no better for it. We are simply following the empty idea of self-denial for no real reason or maybe even to placate some sort of angry God.

We are from dust and to dust we shall return. This is a helpful reminder to us all, because we all have a little God complex in us. We like to be masters of our universe. We try to beat back the forces that might affect our lives and assert our authority over the world around us. We buy into the idea that we can go it alone and make our mark in the world as individuals dependent on no one. We can be younger, more beautiful, more productive, and wealthier, all on our own merit. We do often forget that we owe God, our creator, everything. So, being reminded that we are from dust and to dust we shall return is helpful. It gives us a needed grounding for our feet, our attitudes.

However, we are still loved by God. Hear the Psalmist. God is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness. God will not always accuse us, deal with us according to our sins, nor reward us according to our wickedness. This is a merciful God, a loving God, and a God who is in covenant with us. Far from being a deity who is bringing us low in order to remind us who is boss and put us in our place, it is a God who is reminding us of who we are, so that God might reestablish or strengthen a relationship with us and bring us to new heights. This is a creator who desires a deeper relationship with us, so that we might have lives that are more meaningful, so that God's creation can reflect, more fully, God's beauty and grace. When we hear Jesus talk of prayer, alms giving and fasting, it is to get us out of our self absorbed world, out of our busy

schedules, and get us focused on God, the one who has already showered us with grace in so many ways.

We have been beaten up plenty of late. Ash Wednesday and Lent is not here to pile on more bad news. It is the beginning of a season of opportunity. It is an opportunity to begin new habits, new spiritual disciplines that can draw us closer to God. In the litany of penitence, we come clean before God, acknowledge our sins, so that we can remove a barrier between us and God, so we can come closer to God. God desires a real relationship with each of us. This is not a season of self denial to please an angry God. Giving up something is fine. But the real goal is to develop new habits and build a stronger relationship with God, so our creator can continue the work begun in each of us at our baptism, the work of our sanctification and the work of bringing about God's kingdom. God is at work in us, making us more fully human, so we can better reflect the image of a loving God.