

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and
put a new and right spirit within me.” AMEN!

The late Tony Campolo was a keynote speaker
at the National Youth Gathering in San Antonio, TX

and he told a story about a weekend
he’d spent in Las Vegas long ago.

Ironically, the Baptist Convention was
being held there and
he was to speak at it.

Tony “arrived on a Sunday evening, and
after the local baptist preacher picked
him up at the airport

they headed right for downtown Vegas and
the glitzy casino lights.

Tony had no idea where the pastor was taking him
until finally they pulled up to one of
the biggest casino hotels on the strip.

Lights flashed everywhere,
showgirls strutted wearing next to nothing
and through the doors Tony could
see the rows and rows of

one armed bandits...

those slot machines were lined up and
ready for action as if standing in salute. (Pause)

The pastor chuckled and said,
“We don’t gamble, of course, but
these hotels give us the best rates in town
and we wanted you to have
a comfortable night, Tony.

I will be here at 9 am tomorrow morning, he said,
to take you to the convention.

Tony couldn’t help but feel the excitement of
just being there... just think, a baptist preacher
right in the middle of all that sin!

The next morning, he stood in the lobby waiting
for his ride; one hand on his Bible and
the other in his pocket.

And wouldn’t you know!?!

In that pocket was a quarter.

He turned the coin over in his pocket and
it seemed to grow hot in his fingers.

Tony took a quick glance at the clock...
five minutes to nine.

What could it hurt?

He stepped over to the slot machine and
slipped in the quarter, and gave the arm a pull.

Suddenly, overcome with shame
he quickly turned and
began to walk away.

When suddenly lights began to flash and the
bells began to ring!

Quarters began tumbling loudly into the metal tray.

Tony had won the jackpot!

Confused about what to do he looked
to see people clapping and smiling at
his winning luck.

He thought, I can't just leave the pile of quarters!

So he scooped them up and filled his pockets.

He was thankful that he had his suit on
because he needed every pocket!

Just then the pastor
 (the one who said, “We don’t gamble”)
 drove up to whisk Tony away
 to the convention.

Later, Tony reflected that he’d never preached
 before that day being weighed down
 with so much sin!” :-)

What a paradox tonight is.

On a night when we will smear ashes
 on our foreheads, our gospel lesson tells us
 “to beware of practicing our piety
 before others in order
 to be seen by them.”

Apparently back then, people made a big show of
 their prayers and presentation in order
 to impress onlookers, and maybe even, God.

Joel, the prophet, puts it succinctly too,
 expressing to the hearer that
 “it’s a rending of the heart” God desires,
 “not your torn clothing.”

Back then, people made a big show of repentance
 by tearing their clothes and covering

themselves with ashes.

So, how are we to make sense of
this ancient Christian ritual of ashes on
our forehead and the prophet's call to rend
the heart?

You know the answer, but I must say it still.

We don't do it just to get it done.
We don't participate in it to impress anyone.

Tonight is not something to
mark off the todo list nor will it gain
us credibility with God.

Tonight tells us we are
what the ashes symbolize: insignificant.

Which is a hard lesson to accept in our culture.

When we are trained for fame,
demanding for honor and respect,
and striving for fortune above all else,

the ashes are all that's left
after the glory of fire. (Pause)

The ashes used tonight are what's

left after the altar guild burns the palm fronds
we wave on Palm Sunday.

We are still using the ashes given to me
when I came to be your pastor,
though some of those altar guild folks are
no longer living, they are alive in us.

Alive in the ashes, you might say. (Pause)

Palm Sunday is that day when the people wave
an almost defiant faith that welcomed
Jesus into Jerusalem.

“Almost defiant” because we know
Good Friday looms.

We sing and wave palms celebrating
“Hosanna in the Highest and
Peace to God’s people on earth”
knowing Jesus will die.

What a paradox our faith is!

When we throw a handful of dirt over a grave,
in our practice of burying people,
we commend their souls to God
and acknowledge our own mortality as

we also (one day) return ashes to ashes, dust to dust.
(Pause)

“Remember that you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.”

This, we believe, is what Jesus and Joel
were talking about.

That all our worship, all the ritual
comes down to this:
none of it will save us.

What will is the faith of Jesus and our walk with Him.

That is significant.

Ashes are insignificant, yet our walk
in God's Spirit is significant.

What a paradox!

We are dust and yet, with God we live.

AMEN!