



So, the ashes we use for today are meant to be the culmination of a certain delicate process that I have yet to master. It's quite possible that I just slept through that part of worship class at seminary, but you're supposed to take the palms from last Palm Sunday and burn them to the point of actual ashes, and then add in just the right amount of oil to create some moisture with it, and thus making the exact mixture to smear the absolutely perfect cross on people's foreheads this evening.

Nevertheless, that whole process is nice and all, but I have yet to figure out just the right anything for what should be a relatively easy procedure in the grand scheme of all the church does. Now, in recent years, I have taken a large container outside behind our house, place all the palms in there, and set fire to them. Of course, I'm always worried that surrounding neighbors are going to frantically call the Cleveland Heights Fire Department for the smoke that emerges from our back yard. But once that relatively minor flame settles down, there are always these chunks from the palms that I then try to break down as much as I can to relatively smooth ashes. I must have let my mom know about this unbearable frustration along the way, because she eventually got me this mortar and pestle set, that's obviously meant for people who actually know what they're doing with pottery and medicine as opposed to no-idea-what-the-heck-I'm-doing me with making ashes. So, after a yet another embarrassing attempt last year, including using my mom's wonderful mortar and pestle set to brittle down the ashes even further, out of pure and utter irritation, I simply left that mortar and pestle in our basement sink, and well...they haven't moved since.

And so they sit there in that sink every time I go down to do laundry or get some random cleaning item. But every once in a while, I will wash my hands in that sink, and I look at that mortar and pestle set. Every time, it reminds me of a not-so-straight-forward Ash Wednesday, but it also leads me to look around to the rest of the basement: a basement of a house that has been there over a century, a basement with some cracks, to be sure, an old laundry shoot in the corner that can't be used anymore, a boiler that appears it's been around since the Roosevelt administration, not to mention piles of absolute randomness, as if we have two toddlers running around upstairs or something. It's a place of imperfection galore, and yet a place with so much history that if only the walls could talk, what a story they could tell. It is a place of wrinkles and raggedness and well...chaos, and yet it serves as a collection of life and foundational hope and just enough for what we need to get through the day-to-day.

So, in its own imperfect, but precious way, that basement, and so many like it, serve as a Gospel reminder for this Ash Wednesday. That while cleaned-up and well-kept sanctuaries host worships this evening, they will have their fair share of occupants with raggedness and cracks and well...chaos that may not always be seen on the surface, but well, well beneath. And still, Christ says that a ragged and crack-filled cross is for all of us, with all its hope and beauty and new life galore. That no matter what we bring into this sanctuary today: whatever pile of stress and fear and worry, it is no match whatsoever to the grace that will be unleashed yet again.

Tonight, we will be given the opportunity to have that imperfect, but still most beautiful cross to be placed on our forehead, as a reminder that although we bear mortal bodies, Christ insists on going with us to the very end of that mortality and beyond. However, the ultimate reminder of the Gospel will come in the holy process we carry out tonight, as we will then be invited to taste and see, once again, that not even death will separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ. Because in the body and blood of Christ lie not reminders of our brokenness and all our imperfections, but of God's holy insistence on living with us through it all.

Many children of God will take this day to start a new process of avoiding certain foods or reading Scripture more or whatever else for these several weeks. They will attempt to perfect just the right combination of will-power and attitude and persistence. All well and good. But rest assured, if you cannot master it, if you ever mess up these next forty days or beyond, the ultimate grace we feel and taste tonight will still be for you. No matter the imperfections or the cracks or the raggedness or the chaos ensuing around or within you, rest assured, our Lord already went to the cross for you, and came back with never-ending hope and new life. And it will never be taken away from you, and from the whole world. For that Greatest News not just for Lent, but for all eternity, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!