

“LIFE IS PRECIOUS”
An Ash Wednesday Meditation
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Has anyone ever rubbed your face in something unpleasant – if not literally, then figuratively? The expression “rubbing it in your face” comes from old-school puppy training. People used to believe (and some still do!) that when you’re training a puppy not to “do their business” in the house, you should rub their noses in their business to make them stop this behavior.

Now take the literal meaning and extend it to the metaphorical. Perhaps you’ve made a poor choice or done something flat-out wrong, and someone in your life just won’t let it go; he or she keeps reminding you of your mistake. “You really messed up this time. I warned you not to put off paying that phone bill; now it’s delinquent and they’ve shut off our service. You should have listened to me. I told you so.” And they say it over and over again. You may think to yourself or perhaps even say to your critic, “I know I made a mistake, but you don’t have to rub my face in it and act so superior while you’re doing it.”

Now let me ask you: have you ever wanted to voice these words of protest on Ash Wednesday? Think about what happens during this service: you get a chilling reminder that you are both a mere mortal and a guilty sinner, and then a minister literally rubs it in your face! The liturgy for Ash Wednesday states that ashes are a traditional sign of mortality and penitence. All human lives are limited in duration, and they all begin and end in the same way: “ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” All human lives are also imperfect; and in the biblical tradition, ashes are a symbol of sorrow for our imperfection.

Now, you may agree that ashes are a fitting image for your limitations as a human being. But why can’t that image just appear on the cover of a worship bulletin? Why should you have ashes placed on your forehead like a scarlet letter to underscore your humanness? It is one thing for you to acknowledge that your time on earth is limited and that you have mispent some of the time you have been given. But it is another thing for you to have your face rubbed in this reality – not just figuratively but literally. I wouldn’t be surprised if some of you think of the ashes in purely negative terms, as yet another instance of being shamed just for being human.

Tonight, I want to suggest a different way – indeed, a more positive way – of thinking about the ashes we wear on Ash Wednesday. It comes from a book entitled *My Name is Asher Lev*, written by a Jewish author and rabbi named Chaim Potok. The book tells the story of a young boy who struggles with his relationship with his parents, his religion, and his love for art. On a Sabbath day, Asher Lev and his father are on their way back home from the synagogue. His father spots a bird lying on its side against the curb near their house.

The boy asks, “Is it dead, Papa?” He is six years old and can’t bring himself to look.

“Yes,” he hears his father say in a sad and distant way.

“Why did it die?”

“Everything that lives must die.”

“Everything?”

“Yes.”

“You, too, Papa? And Mama?”

“Yes.”

“And me?”

“Yes,” the father says. Then he adds in Yiddish, “But may it be only after you live a long and good life, my Asher.”

The little boy can’t grasp it. He forces himself to look at the bird. Everything alive will one day be as still as that bird? “Why?” he asks.

His father replies, “That’s the way [God] made his world, Asher.”

“Why?”

“So life would be precious, Asher. Something that is yours forever is never precious.”

I wonder, is it possible that these ashes are not just a sign that our lives are finite and flawed, but also a sign that our lives are precious?

I recently watched a documentary entitled, “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” Most of you can guess who the documentary was about. For over 30 years, Fred Rogers, an unassuming minister, puppeteer, writer and producer, was beamed daily into homes across America. In his beloved television program, *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, Fred and his cast of puppets and friends spoke directly to young children about some of life’s weightiest issues, in a simple, direct fashion.

Mr. Rogers delivered one message to children more than any other. If he had been delivering this message as a children’s sermon in a church, he might have said: “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world.” But Mr. Rogers was speaking to a wider audience on TV, and what he said was simply this: “You are special. You are unique. Your life is precious, and others’ lives are also precious, so treat them as such.” Mr. Rogers repeated this message to his audience over and over again. You might even say that he rubbed their faces in it. And it is no wonder that he did. For children and grown-ups alike, the message that all life is precious is reassuring to hear, but it is difficult to believe, and even more difficult to heed.

You’ll recall that the psalmist prayed to God: “Teach us to number our days” (Psalm 90:12). Now, there is no question that our days are numbered. The real question is, do you and I bother to count them? Do we treasure our days and make the most of them? The fact that our days are numbered is not a sign that we are weak; it is a sign that we are strong – that you and I have gifts and opportunities that are too valuable to waste.

It occurs to me tonight that my days as your pastor are numbered: I have less than two and a half years before I am mandated to retire. Will I be coasting to the finish line, or sprinting with every ounce of energy I have? Your days are also numbered – as a hands-on parent, as an active employee, as a member of this church, as a healthy, able-bodied person. Are you just playing out the string, or do you cherish each day and use it to its maximum potential?

You and I do a lot of waiting in our lives – you know, biding time between one purposeful activity and the next. We wait thirty minutes for our favorite TV program to start; we wait an hour to see our doctor for a checkup; we wait weeks or months for the next visit with our grown children or growing grandchildren; we wait for what seems like an eternity for spring to come, to be set free to enjoy the great outdoors again. While you and I wait, we say glibly that we are “killing time,” without realizing that the time we are killing is our own time. And once that time passes, we will never get it back.

You see, these ashes invite us to regard our lives not as cheap but as precious – too precious to fritter away either in idleness or in frivolous activity; and, yes, too precious to waste in some far country, misbehaving like spoiled adolescents. To put it in an old-fashioned way, our lives are too precious to live in bondage to sin, and it is never too late to repent of our sin and move our lives in a new direction.

Friends, the ashes that will be rubbed on our faces tonight are not meant to shame us for being mortals and sinners; they are meant to remind us of one of the deepest truths about life and then inspire us to live life to the fullest. And what is this truth, this source of inspiration? Everything alive will one day be as still as that bird discovered by Asher Lev. Why? Because that’s the way God made the world. Why? So life would be precious. Something that is ours forever is never precious.