



Ash Wednesday Homily
March 2, 2022
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One of the most painful moments in the walk with regret,
is when you look back at something been doing
that seemed so meaningful and important
and suddenly realize
that you've been doing it for all the wrong reasons.

That's how my journey to repentance always begins.
There is an epiphany that shines light into some darkness in my life.
The light sparks regret, it kindles its way to repentance,
And in the end what's left,
is a pile of ashes called redemption.

Here's my story of regret
The first time I brought home "the flowers" was Valentine's Day.
I didn't give it much thought.
I loved her,
and I wanted that love to have some living fragrant symbol
...that acknowledged how beautiful love is,
but how fragile and ephemeral at the same time.
She was pleased, of course,
What beautiful roses, and such a thoughtful gesture...she said.
But then, that simple gesture turned into something of an obsession.

For the first year, I started bringing them home every 14th of the month,
The second year, I brought them home on the same day every week,
And then,
sometime in the third year, when I went to buy those flowers,
I realized that the relationship was over,
...had been over for some time.

I realized that bringing home those flowers, all that time,
was a symbol of denial and desperation
...that instead of confronting a relationship that was failing,

I hid behind the roses
the flowers, as it turned out, merely masked the scent of decay.

When I saw for the first time what those flowers really meant,
there was regret, I had to say that the relationship was over,
There was repentance, I confessed how I had fallen short,
And there was redemption,
it took some time to sift through the ashes,
but I found love again, thank God.

It is the “Ash Wednesday” lesson of my life,
because what I learned from that painful process was this:

Signs and Symbols are replete with meaning,
When they are authentic, when they come from the heart
they gather what cannot be communicated with words
they capture the ineffable and enshrine
it in something simple and beautiful.
And they are so much more than what they seem.

But when they are inauthentic,
Signs are empty gestures of denial,
when they come from a place of self-deception,
signs become mockeries of what they were intended to be,
And the meaning behind them gets lost in the delusion.

That’s the story of the hypocrites,
whom Jesus warns us against in today’s Gospel
They became so fixated on the GESTURES of their faith,
that the meaning behind those gestures is lost.

As symbols of their faith,
as gestures of their relationship
with each other and with their God...

They gave alms,
not because they were compelled through love
to share of the gifts they had been given,
but because they sought to hoard the praise of their peers.

They prayed,
not to enter into dialogue and relationship with the Other,
but to hear the sounds of their own voices,
and to make sure they were heard by others.

They fasted,
Not to fill themselves
in silence and solitude with the presence of God
But because they hungered for the loud clamour of the world's acclaim.

That's the story that comes to us on Ash Wednesday.
It's the story of how we can hide behind symbols, gestures, or signs
How they can mask what's really going on in our lives.
In the case of the hypocrite in today's Gospel,
to veil an empty and vain piety.

And as I learned in my own life
empty gestures,
...being mired in self-deception
that's part of who we are, too.
And it's why on this day we repent.

In other words,
the Gospel is not the just speaking about the hypocrites,
it is speaking to us.

When we deceive ourselves,
when we don't acknowledge how we stray from our relationship with God,
when we don't acknowledge our own proclivity
towards self-deception and self-aggrandizement,
when we don't name our SIN,
those signs and gestures become caricatures,
two dimensional, vain,
and exaggerated images,
of what they were meant to be.
They become a mockery.
You can't hide behind the roses.

And that brings us to the sign
upon which our attention is focussed today

What about the cross of ashes we are receiving on our foreheads.

What does this gesture of which we partake mean for us?
Are the ashes a truly humble avowal that we are dust,
that we acknowledge how fragile and precious a gift
our lives and our relationships are,
or are they the remnants of a yearning for our God and one another
that once burned hot with passion,
but have now become cold.

And what about the cross,
is it really for us a sign of the mystery and paradox,
that out of death comes new life,
...that our journey is one that ends in transformation.

or are we really drawing a happy face on our foreheads,
a symbol of a shallow piety,
that denies the necessity of self-examination,
that can't bear the truth
that new life only comes through sacrifice.

or worse,
are we drawing a skull and cross-bones, here,
an ashen jolly roger, which proclaims that
we are so beaten down
by our own perverse sense that we are sinful and beyond redemption,
that there is no hope, is no resurrection.

Okay those may be a little extreme,
but they point to the reality
of knowing what your being signed with
And embracing what your being signed for.

We are signed with the cross and reminded that
we are dust and to dust we shall return.
But that reminder is not meant to be our fate,
it is meant to be our hope,
because this journey doesn't leave us
sealed with the experience of death,

it leads us to the experience of new life.

So in that gesture of being signed with the cross,
that you will experience in just a moment,
I invite you to consider this:

In that vertical stroke of ashes that will adorn your forehead,
that capital “I” is about your identity.
All that is good and holy and loving,
all that is uniquely you,
is affirmed and embraced by God in Jesus Christ.

But in that horizontal stroke that completes the cross
you are being called to negate,
to rid yourself of all that is that is evil and profane and loathing in your life.
To give up those things which separate us from the love of God
And your neighbour.

And the completion of that cross
is meant to carry you on that journey
to become what God intended you to be,
to be more fully who you are.

Today,
we moved from fire to ashes.
Regret and repentance burn their way
through our contrite hearts
leaving a pile of ashes we call redemption.

And for the next 40 days,
we sift through those ashes
proclaiming our hope
that out of the charred fragments of our own broken lives,
we rise with Christ in the Easter fire of New life
and emerge as God’s new creation. Amen.