

Ash Wednesday 2019. March 6, 2019.

Ash Wednesday does not emphasize the whole truth about us, but it does speak truthfully to us about ourselves. And it tells us the truths that we would rather avoid. Of course, we don't have to look hard for messages that we aren't that great and that we're probably going to die. Our culture is happy to tell us this, but it's not particularly subtle about framing this reality as a consumer problem. "You are not who you should be and you are going to die, but if you buy this product or adopt this method of folding your underwear, both problems will be fixed." This is putting a fact to work in service to a lie.

We are told often that we are not good enough because of how we look, or who we love, or how little money we make. Parents are constantly assured that they are failing because their kids aren't quite the top of the class, with the most extra-curriculars, a modest fashion-forward wardrobe, a fully developed Franciscan Buddhist Universalist spirituality, and a well-defended democratic socialist woke politics. And of course, we all know that we're about to die, because of people who don't look like us or villains who do look like us. Because of something hiding in our food or clothing or blood. But these dire warnings are profit driven, with cheap solutions coming right behind the warnings.

And we tend to respond by fighting back. If this is a lie, we assume that the opposite must be the truth. And so we've developed an almost equally powerful counter culture of unconditional self-affirmation. To try to convince ourselves that we do not believe the caricatures of our depravity and fragility, we construct counter-caricatures of our virtue and invincibility. Since we are at heart great, so must be everything we do and are. We are perfectly wonderful and sufficient islands unto ourselves, impervious and immovable.

Ash Wednesday is an antidote both to the lie that we are unlovable, and to the lie that we don't need to be loved. It confronts us with the truth that we are not what we shall and should be. This is not to sell us something, but simply to help us to live truthfully. Living truthfully is hard to do when it seems like so many lies are available for purchase. And so Ash Wednesday is big and bold and brash. We put ash on our foreheads literally with the words, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." But then we celebrate the Eucharist, where we are reminded of what God has done for us, of the ways that God is saving us. Where we are caught up into the hope and beauty of the life of God.

The deep truth of Ash Wednesday is not that we are miserable sinners who are going to die. It is that we are loved by God, and that we desperately need this love—because we are not what we should and shall be. We need this love because we live amidst death, and this love brings us to life. We need this love because we live with and in and surrounded by sin, and this love empowers us to do and be good. Ash Wednesday confronts us with the truth that we sin and will die. But the point of showing us ourselves in this way is to remind us how badly we need the love of God. Trusting that love, accepting that love, relying upon that love is the way to live truthfully.