

## Ash Wednesday

Every few years, Ash Wednesday strikes me as a futile exercise.  
Didn't we do this last year? Didn't we make a fulsome repentance?  
An extravagant show of our wretchedness and sorrow for our sin?  
Didn't I announce, a year ago, and me and some other priests, for these many years,  
A hope that "the rest of our life hereafter may be pure and holy"  
Have you been pure and holy all year, since then? I haven't.  
I am afraid Ash Wednesday didn't work, if it was supposed to insure I would be good from then  
on.  
And here we are, to give it another try.

Maybe there is some misunderstanding here.  
Maybe we aren't locked in dreary cycle of ineffective annual repentance.

Let me start again with this: There was an article in the New York Times this week entitled:  
*"Why Trying to be Less Awkward Never Works."*  
Those of us who have tried to be less awkward hardly needed to read the article.  
If you have to steel yourself for parties; if you are pained by coffee hour at church; if you have  
never had a good job interview, you know.  
I can barely permit myself to remember how I felt at the first dances and parties I went to in  
middle school.  
Nothing I tried to do to be less awkward ever helped, except growing up and not having to go to  
dances and middle school parties any longer.  
The only recommendation the article had that had ever seemed to help was to train oneself by a  
little experiment.  
Have one conversation in which you are paying attention to yourself.  
How am I feeling as I talk to this person?  
What will my next line in conversation be?  
Am I smiling genuinely?  
Am I responding appropriately?

And then have a second conversation in which you pay deep attention to the other person?  
What is he feeling as he speaks?  
Why does he care about this subject?  
How have worries and smiles and concentration creased her face over the years?

And then ask yourself, after the conversations, which one you enjoyed?  
In which you felt at ease and felt your self.  
People nearly invariably say the second conversation, the one in which they focused on the other.  
Researchers say that our brains aren't really able to pay good attention to two things; like another  
person and ourselves in conversation.  
Whole hearted attention to another works for better for us and may make us happier.

So maybe today isn't about us.

Ash Wednesday seems to demand preaching on our human condition, on our sin, on our mortality.

But maybe today could or should, at least this year be about our great conversation partner, the living God revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

And maybe we will grow closer to God and to holiness by dwelling on God, on who God is.

Maybe sometimes, the best way to be changed is less attention to self and more to the other.

If we are less awkward when we forget ourselves, maybe we are more holy when we attend to God.

Who is this God? Joel tells us:

Return to the LORD, your God,  
for he is gracious and merciful,

slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,  
and relents from punishing.

Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,  
and leave a blessing behind him.

When you confess your sins, when you ask to be made new, it is to a god like this that you speak.

Gracious, merciful, slow to anger, steadfast in love, unlikely to punish, ready to relent, quick to bless.

A God, Jesus says, who needs no show of piety, who demands not costly sacrifice, but a God who sees in secret and means to reward you.

Is this the God to whom you have been repenting? Is this the God you bear in mind?

Mercifully holy, lovingly gracious, anxious to reclaim and embrace.

To pay attention to such a God, to give thanks to such a God, to love such a God, is surely the surest path to true repentance and transformation.

As trying to be less awkward makes you more awkward, there is a tolerable chance that trying to be holy will make you less so.

This Lent, try to love the God, this God, who loves you and see what difference that makes.

What we have been giving in Jesus Christ is the revelation of a God who has closed the gap between our sin and divine holiness by his own power and at his own cost.

The path to holiness is to love God for that.