

Sermon: Ash Wednesday Reflection

Year B, Ash Wednesday

[Joel 2:1–2, 12–17; Psalm 51:1-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10; Matthew 6:1–6, 16–21](#)

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Maybe I'm alone in this, but when I have folks over, I like my home to be tidy and welcoming. Way more tidy and welcoming than it normally is. I usually start by really putting things away. But there comes a point where I am just shoving stuff anywhere. I put my guests' coats on my bed because if I opened the coat closet someone would be crushed under an avalanche of vacuums and mail I haven't gotten to, ironing to do and recycling that needs to go down to the car. My guests, polite as they are, will say I have a lovely home. What I really have is a lovely façade. Don't open the closets. Don't open the drawers. And for God's sake, don't look in the cabinet under the sink!

To my shame on this Ash Wednesday evening, I thought of the personal prayers I had offered to God in the last couple days. They were all prayers asking for help to maintain the façade. Dear God, get me to my meeting on time. Dear God, help me not roll my eyes with this person. Dear God, let me do my taxes correctly.

I am expert on maintaining my façade. I can even do it so I sound super faithful. I have walked away from very well paying jobs because that's all they were, well paying, with no growth, no joy, no path to becoming more than what I was when I started. As my parents age, we are having those tough conversations when I say that I am trying to be an obedient daughter, honoring my mother and father, but I need them to give a little, to let me help them more, especially as they wend their way through the health care thicket.

Sure they're good things, faithful things. But they are façade things. They are what I do to allow myself to pretend I'm in charge. If I have a job that challenges me and helps me grow into the person God intends for me to be, I can think that I am able to bring myself to God. If my parents and I develop better conversation skills, I can think that I have a relationship that is described by Scripture. All by myself.

We come to this Ash Wednesday evening, this night which begins a more than month long journey of repentance to the cross of Good Friday. We come to this Ash Wednesday and we meet Psalm 51. *My sin is ever before me* (Psalm 51:3). Whatever personal definition of sin you have, in general it is that thing which separates you from the love of God. And whatever you're doing that separates you from the love of God is what is separating you from the true, deep, crushed bone (Psalm 51:8) knowledge that you are not God.¹ That you are not in charge. That you cannot be *restored to the joy of your salvation* or *sustained in a willing spirit* (Psalm 51:12) by your own efforts, your own initiative. Our sin is ever before us, but most of the time we don't see it because we are so good at building a façade, so good at doing what it takes to pretend that we are God.

¹ Geoffrey M. St. J Hoare, "Ash Wednesday, Pastoral Perspective, Psalm 51:1-17" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 10.

We're not. We are dust. [Ashes to ashes and dust to dust]. When we realize that the only thing which has created us is God, the only thing which keeps us from nothingness is God,² we are free to hear the Good News. When we truly accept that we are not God, that we do not have the control we like to pretend we have, then we can enter into the call to follow Christ with *a new and right spirit* (Psalm 51:10) within us.

When the psalm says *The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.* (Psalm 51:17), I hear God calling us to break the façade.³ To stop wearing ourselves out pretending to be something we're not, pretending to be capable of doing something we cannot possibly do alone. Let us break the pretense that being a Christian is something we can accomplish all by ourselves. Jesus calls us *to take up our cross and follow him* (Matthew 16:24). We are defeated by that call. We cannot do it. The cross of ashes on our forehead tonight is as stark a reminder of our perpetual failure as we can get.

But the repentance in the face of that failure, the willingness to break the façade in a million pieces and ask God for the change of heart, the change of direction, we need, that repentance is also in the cross of ashes on our foreheads. For that promise, that grace, is with us always, is always available, that God has never left us, that is the promise of the cross as well, and for that promise we rise,⁴ *cleansed and washed* (Psalm 51:7).

Break down the façade, O God. Let me *sing aloud of your deliverance* (Psalm 51:14). [For ashes I am, and to ashes I will return], save for your *abundant mercy, your steadfast love* (Psalm 51:1).

² Brian Brickson, "Ash Wednesday, Homiletical Perspective, Psalm 51:1-17" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 13.

³ Beth LaNeel Tanner, "Preaching the penitential psalms." *Word & World* 27, no. 1 (2007): 91.

⁴ Liz Goodman, "Preaching the Lenten texts." *Journal For Preachers* 37, no. 2 (2014): 10.