

## ASH WEDNESDAY: ASHES TO GO

Joel 2:12 “Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. . .”

“Times they are a changing,” sang Bob Dylan in 1964, and that sentiment remains true still today, especially for the Church. For Christianity is in the midst of a major transformation in our day, and what exactly the future will look like for the Church is unknown and unknowable. But the ‘old’ model is decidedly dead. For the old way of doing things was not working, the churches have seen drastic declining attendance for forty years, across the entire spectrum of denominations, and especially among the young. The old image of the beautiful church settled on top of the hill with its doors wide open on Sunday mornings and people inside to warmly welcome you, is not reaching the people down in the streets. The old corporate model of a priest as the chief executive, with a staff offering a variety programs and services, is not bringing people into the life of our congregations anymore, and is becoming cost prohibitive. All that represents old-fashioned twentieth century practices that are inappropriate in the new twenty-first century. A new age requires the churches to change, as we have continually changed over the centuries. A new age requires the church to do things differently.

So eight years ago on Ash Wednesday, at 7:00 a.m. in the morning, I took up my black cassock and white surplice, and my cloak because it was cold outside, and went downtown to the Bridgeport Train Station and offered ashes to any of the commuters who wished them as they were heading off to work. I invited my friends and colleagues, the Pastor from the big Methodist Church and the Minister from the historic Congregational Church to join me, and they did. We each vested according to our traditions, and we three downtown clergy stood together in solidarity to address the religious needs of the people of our city. We offered the imposition of ashes on the Ash Wednesday on the train platform to any who wished them, because that traditional

reminder of our mortality, that traditional reminder of our humility, and our need for repentance, should not be confined only to church buildings seated on top of the hill. Our culture probably needs that religious reminder more in the middle of our working day and our busy lives, than at any other place! The ashes we offered there were to remind us all, throughout the day, of our need for God, and of God's call to us to make the world a better place, to make a difference with our lives. Those ashes were a powerful cultural symbol with which the masses on that train platform longed to connect. All three of us clergy were surprised at the extremely positive and thankful responses from those on their way to work the first time we tried this, and so we continued the practice each thereafter for the next eight years. I missed that gathering this morning.

That activity was part of a movement called "Ashes to Go", which St. John's Episcopal Church in St Louis, Missouri, originated in 2007 as an ecumenical outreach. "Ashes to Go" is about bringing our spirit, belief, and belongings out from behind church doors, and into the places where we live and work every day. It's a simple action with deep meaning, drawing on centuries of tradition and worship to provide a contemporary moment of grace in the lives of ordinary people. The symbol of our joint action was a strong invitation to those present to come share with us in God's grace, especially when we take that action outside the walls of the church building. It is not enough to simply welcome people into our buildings anymore. We must go out into the streets and invite them to join us, and show them what we mean and that we care.

One of the things I love about 'Ashes to Go' is how very simple it is: a few people, outside the church walls, with a container of ashes and an openness to God's people on the streets, or anywhere in the routine of our lives. One of the gifts of "Ashes to Go" is that the church becomes visible in new ways. Sometimes it's hard to get to church on a Wednesday in the middle of a work week, in the middle of our busy lives. And it's much harder to get to church on a Wednesday if we've gotten out of the habit of going entirely, and Ash Wednesday is especially for people whose relationship to God isn't perfect.

Ash Wednesday is about confessing the messiness of our lives, and claiming our desire for renewal, and understanding, and forgiveness, and healing. So Ash Wednesday

perfectly belongs in the messy places of our lives: in our commute, our meetings, the kitchen, classroom or office.

Still what we do here in church tonight is also so much more than what we did on the street corner. Here we confess, repent, reflect, pray, and receive God's gifts together in community. Ideally, many of the people who received ashes on the street corner will want to join or rejoin a faith community for corporate worship on Ash Wednesday, but maybe not and that's okay. We also handed out brochures with some Lenten prayers, and details of our church services. But many people literally cannot get to church on Ash Wednesday – working long hours or two jobs to make ends meet, or committed to substantial family or community needs. Others have forgotten that the church is here for people who *aren't* already right with God. That's why we Christians must go into the streets to be known and seen. Our actions speak louder than our words. If you aren't ready or able to come to church, then the church, we witnessed, is willing and able to come to you, with God's invitation to relationship, repentance and healing.

In the Episcopal Church's liturgy for this day, the imposition of ashes serves as our invitation to repentance, and a response to our hearing the Word of God. 'Ashes to Go' moves that encounter with God and that invitation to repentance out of the church building, into the spaces of everyday life, where we really live out our responses to God. The grace comes from God, the same free gift at the same cost as God's grace made known inside the church and out on the streets. It is a symbol of the way the church is changing these days, reaching out to God's people in new and different ways, and perhaps even more effective ways, as I usually ashed twice as many people there at the train station as I did later that night in the church. So I invite all of us this Lent, to begin to think differently about the nature of the church, to consider ways of going out in the streets where we live and work and play, and witness like "Ashes to Go" in small ways to the grace of God in our lives and in the life of this community, and then invite others to join us here in our common life and ministry, if they wish. But in the end, the goal is not to get people back up the hill and into the church, the goal is to minister to God's people, where ever they are. AMEN.