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Ash Wednesday

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I'm not exactly sure what to make of Ash Wednesday this year; not to mention Lent. This third lap through the season in COVID world, I'm sort of running out of things to say. We've been living in a 2-year long lent, and COVID reminds us daily that we are dust, that our lives are fleeting and fragile. We've seen so many precious lives return to dust. We've seen precious lives in Ukraine displaced, made to suffer because of one man's ego. Life rendered fragile and mortal by another fragile and mortal person. And that's been so so difficult, on all of us. Why are we marking ourselves with mortality; we've all already been marked?

So this year I want to look at Ash Wednesday a little differently. I want us to hear COVID's indictment upon us to reckon with our mortality, and flip it to let Ash Wednesday be a day where we are invited to embrace our humanity. In all of the complexity, ambiguity, doubt, and uncertainty involved.

It struck me the other day that this is the first time for all of us to be human. Barring your belief in reincarnation, this is our first crack at this thing. We're all certified amateurs. We came into the world fragile and needy, and we relied on our parents to nurture us, which required a lot of trust since this was their first time at parenting, not to mention their first-time being human themselves. We listened to other first-time humans tell us how to behave, and what to aspire to, and how to live. Because we've never done this before; because we are all in a way first timers, I think we feel a sense of anxiety and even shame at our humanity. We don't always know what we are doing, or who to trust – who can we trust?

The tradition of the church acknowledges this anxiety, deepens it, and to some degree darkens the narrative. Because of our instability at being human, we try to escape it, we try to become like God. Embarrassed with being human, we try to become gods – that is, we grasp after omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. There is a part of us that wants to be omnipotent over our lives and our relationships. To manage how people respond and receive us, and see us. We long for omniscience – we read and read books, listen to podcasts, and take in the expert's opinions; we seek more understanding and more intellectual expertise because if we can only know more about being human, we might not have to experience its sharper edges. And what modern technological society but a yearning for omnipresence? What is Facebook and social media besides the secret wish to be everywhere, having front row seats to everyone's lives all at once? We wish there were more of us to go around. We grasp for the omni's because its difficult just to be human, to embrace our humanity.

I've learned a lot about all of this being a father for the first time. I feel rather more at times like a royal servant in Queen Addie's courts. Whatever she wants I am there to supply. But we are in this frustrating phase where she isn't really interested in taking a bottle; she only wants Mama. And frankly, it's stressed me out to know end to watch how much she hates the bottle even coming near her. I take it personally. There might as well be a Do Not Enter sign over her mouth. It's been such a tiny little thing, that in reality I know I shouldn't get bothered about. But it makes me feel helpless and not important and just totally not in control. Helpless and not in control are up there with death and judgement for the most dreaded signals on my soul's radar. Just acknowledging that has been tough. But I'm learning new shades of what it means to be human. I never knew I could love something and someone so much that the tiniest thing in the world could feel like an affront. Receive my love, child! But apparently this is what it means to be human and vulnerable and open in brand new ways to love.

Ash Wednesday is a day that gives us an ability to make peace with our own humanity. We aren't God; we often feel out of control and powerless; and those feelings often feel uncomfortable and icky and frustratingly human. That's okay. That's why we have each other. That's why we pray. To acknowledge our humanity takes wisdom; to trust we are accepted in it takes grace.

Where in your life are you really really looking for an answer, or a quick fix? Chances are that's a place where your humanity is trying to be more deeply accepted?

Where are you frustrated and at your wits end with someone? What if you saw them not as a bad person, but as someone like you who has never been human before? We're all just trying to figure it out.

Are you more concerned with managing other people's perceptions of you than actually being you? Is your life a juggling act of responsibilities and you wish you could be more than one person? Take a deep breath, and let God be God for you.

When I was in seminary I worked maintenance as a summer job. Scrubbed toilets and showers (of my fellow seminarians); folded towels; mopped and waxed floors; painted walls; and just did what I was told. My wingman that summer, the guy I was apprenticed to, was Bob. And Bob wasn't the fastest worker on the planet. We'd get our day's assignments and more days than not we'd only get about a tenth of it done. To our supervisor at the end of the day Bob would love to

say, “I am just one guy. I’m just one guy, take it easy.” Yes, Bob was probably a little bit lazy. Sure, he wanted to stop after a few streaks with the mop to talk about the Steelers; yes his 5 minute snack break lasted 20. But he cleaned the heck out of toilets, and if you were a scuff mark on a linoleum floor or a piece of gum stuck on the underside of a cafeteria table, you didn’t stand a chance. He reached out to students. He knew everyone’s name. Bob was just a human being, just one. But he delighted in being Bob; he struck me as delighting in the distinct privilege that it was just to be alive. I saw it on his face; how he delighted in being human. He made me want to do the same.

I still am not totally sure what to make of Ash Wednesday, or of Lent. There are signs of our mortality hanging up all around. We are wearied from COVID; and we feel utterly at loss at the violence in Ukraine. Some of us are exhausted. Some of us feel powerless over our lives. And some of us don’t know why we’ve come to a gathering to contemplate our mortality. For me, this is a place to acknowledge two things at the same time. The first is to tell the truth about my life and about my world. To be honest about how I’m doing. To acknowledge the difficulty, say, with a family member. To allow to surface anxieties around finances, or retirement, or how much we miss a loved one. To acknowledge the feelings of powerlessness that is involved in parenting. To consider the passing of time, and what it means to be a year older, and to see your parents a year older. To allow my heart to feel what it feels. And then to acknowledge that somehow our life is, even now, a gift none of us asked for. Time is a precious reward none of us deserve. The love and kindness that makes our lives possible are utter grace. This year, I’m seeing Ash Wednesday as an invitation to acknowledge the distinct privilege that it is to be human.

Remember that you are dust. And, give thanks when you can for what you can.