

Why I wear ashes I can't even see.

When I need to remember something important, which lately I find is often, I try and write it down somewhere, like I'll type a note on my phone, or on a post-it note, or sometimes if I'm really desperate on my hand. Every once in a while, if I'm running short on time and can't find a pen, I'll put a rubber band on my wrist. The problem with doing that however is that at the end of the day I'll get home and be like, "Now what is this here for again? Oh yeah, it's definitely for ... *something*." Ever done that?

Anyway, you probably have some kind of method that works for you. Maybe like me you have a place at home where you keep most of your important notes like on the fridge or on the bathroom mirror or in your car, next to your bed or a desk- could be anywhere really as long as it works.

There is however one place that as far as I'm concerned practically no one uses to store notes, and that would be on our foreheads. Why? Well, first of all it's hard to do. Do you write the note upside down or right side up? Think about that for a sec. Second, you can't see it, really. In the absence of a mirror, the middle of one's forehead has got to be one of, if not the most difficult place on your body to see for yourself.

So why then every year – especially in light of the gospel we just read (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21) where Jesus' enjoins his listeners *not* to make any kind of bodily spectacle of their discipleship - do we subject ourselves to this quaint little ritual of letting someone leave a liturgical post-it note right between the eyes while saying "Remember that you are dust and unto dust you shall return"? I mean, think about it, if whoever imposes the ashes on you *really* wants you to remember this sad yet powerful fact of existence, then why doesn't he or she put them on, oh I dunno, your hand, or maybe your arm or heck just hand you a sticky note and say, "Here, put this on your bathroom mirror? It's important, like really important."

Well, one reason we do it this way is precisely because it *is* important; so important in fact that we don't just leave it up to ourselves to remember but rather set it up so that we have to look to one another to be reminded. I don't have to tell you, but more often than not, when some things are left to ourselves, and just ourselves, it's way too easy to lose that "important" slip of paper in the midst of all the other piles of papers that we clutter our lives up with, or to erase that one text from all the hundreds of texts on our phones – especially if we do not want to think about it. But, when we look into the face of the person right in front of us and see that powerful cross right there on his or her forehead standing there right in front of us, even after the ashes have shifted away to dust, it's hard, it's really hard, maybe even impossible if you love that person, to misplace that reminder.

"Remember mortal that you are dust and unto dust you shall return." Because it's right there, staring us in the face and in the only way we can possibly talk about this as Christians is in community.

You see, Sin, Separation and ultimately Death are not just things which affect us as individuals. Whenever they are present, and that would be all the time to a greater or lesser extent, they affect the entire community, *all of us*. When I sin, you feel it. When you sin, I

feel it. When we both sin, others feel it, in fact the whole world feels it. The people in Flint Michigan feel it. Nearer to home, guiltless folks on the near east and near west side of our own city feel it. The countless tribes of humanity living in the shadow of economic and militaristic terrorism feel it. The collapsing Arctic feels it. Our elders in the faith, the Jewish people who cradled our Savior in his childhood, felt this. In fact, the ancient rabbis were so aware of how tightly we are bound one to another that they once wrote, "Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world." (Talmud)

Tonight, we will embody, in a literal way with the imposition of ashes, this profound and even intimate connectedness to one another by showing and thus sharing with one another our very brokenness. *In a very real sense, you will wear the ashes for me.* That is the only way I will be able to see them and remember. *And, in turn, I will wear the ashes for you.* Not so that we can set ourselves up for censure like those people Jesus' criticized when he said, and I paraphrase, "Do not be like those hypocrites who wear their ashes like a badge of pious honor" But rather so that we will come to realize that our repentance is not just for ourselves as individuals – which is nice I suppose - but even more importantly our repentance is for the sake of the whole world, for every living thing, that is, not you, and that is not me. We wear the ashes tonight not for ourselves but for others. I will wear the ashes for you and you will wear the ashes for me. I will remind you of your sin and brokenness and you will remind me of mine.

And we do this not because we are maudlin and gloomy people, far from it. No, we do this because *before* there were the ashes on our foreheads, there was, still is and always will be the cross of our baptisms, traced out in oil upon our foreheads some time ago by another flawed and sinful Christian but one who acted on behalf of the Risen Christ. And if our ashen cross reminds us of our shared brokenness, our baptismal cross proclaims that sin and death does not and will not have the last word. For at the end of our Lenten journey - the end to which we all are moving - stands the Cross of Christ - sin's last, desperate, but ultimately impotent swipe against God, and God's last, powerful and never-ending embrace of, well, us.

And so, my brothers and sisters, we who are here by Christ's holy invitation, I invite you this Lenten season, to carry *both* crosses upon your brow, one upon the other. Carry the ashen reminder for me that I am in desperate need of repentance at all times, and for the love of God carry the grace-filled cross that proclaims the good news that through Jesus that I am both forgiven and loved. And I promise I will do the same for you, not for ourselves, never for just ourselves, but for the sake of God's holy kingdom. Amen.