



There was this brief time during this whole doing a pastor thing that I thought it would be best if I actually made the ashes, as if the more organic kind would make it more meaningful or something. It's supposed to be a relatively straight-forward process, so the church people say. All you have to do is take the palms from the previous Palm Sunday and burn them to the point of actual ashes and add in a little oil to create just the right concoction for smear-ness and smooth-ness purposes on the foreheads of all those who gather for your Ash Wednesday services. Now, I must have

slept through the part of worship class at seminary in which the professor had to have said, in explaining the simplest process in all the church operation: that, in order to make these ashes, you also need the essential ingredient of common sense, which has never been my strong suit.

And so several years ago, I took the palms from the Palm Sunday before and placed them in a container outside in our backyard, but after starting the fire, I had neglected to realize that smoke would be involved, soaring over the fence, and so neglecting the possibility that, at least one of our neighbors was going to frantically call our local fire department. Thankfully, they all must have been distracted with other things at the time. Nevertheless, after the flames dissipated, the palms left behind these chunks that I could not for the pastor-life of me break down to complete smooth dust. Frustration ensued, and I must have even complained to my mom about it, because soon enough in the mail came this package with a mortar and pestle set inside. A nice thought and all from my mom, but such tools are for those who have an idea what they're doing instead of no-idea-what-the-heck-I'm-doing with me ashes. Nevertheless, I tried again, and still: these stubborn chunks; that if I defiantly tried to still use for any Ash Wednesday proceeding, would lead the recipients to not be so overly enthused with the pastor. And so, it's possible that out of further frustration, I might have thrown that mortar and pestle set into our basement sink, and they stayed there for what felt like forever.

And yet, amidst that seemingly forever, anytime I would wash my hands in that sink, that mortar and pestle set would remind me of a...not so straightforward Ash Wednesday. And I would look around to the rest of the space, in a basement of a house that has been there over a century: a basement that has its fair share of cracks and raggedness and well chaos. There's a laundry shoot in the corner that, of course, cannot be used anymore. Then there's the boiler that appears as if it's been there since the Roosevelt administration, maybe even the Teddy Roosevelt one. And yet, somehow, somehow, that basement seems to give us just enough of a foundation to get through our day-to-day. Just enough: and I wonder if that is part of the Good News for this sometimes emotionally chaotic Ash Wednesday.

This Ash Wednesday that will welcome children of God throughout the world to sanctuaries that are incredibly well kept and beautified for the occasion, all welcoming people with faith journeys and life processes that have not been so straightforward, to say the least. People with hidden spiritual cracks, raggedness of mistakes made with a fervent desire to take it all back, not to mention these chunks of guilt and fear and worry. Some of which, if we're honest, the church has not always helped with, as if it should be a relatively straightforward process to come to a place like this and just get it all taken care of with our precious ingredients of grace and love and compassion. But, sometimes, it isn't always that easy.

Except, on this Ash Wednesday, this church insists on offering more than just enough to get you through this day/night, to get you through these next 40 days, to empower you throughout a lifetime. But it's not from our own supply, only from the One who insists that dust will not remain upon you, including in the depths of your precious heart. Only from the One who insists that no sin will separate

you from God's love. Only from the One who refuses to allow death to win forever. On this day/night when far too many children of God seriously wonder if they have enough to get through it: yes, the church will do its Ash Wednesday obligation and place some dust on your forehead, but then the church, within an instant, will also give you the holy time and space to taste and see the Greatest News of all: that no matter the spiritual cracks or the memories of raggedness or the chunks of inner personal struggle; none of it is a match to the breath-taking simplicity of a piece of bread and a few drops of wine or grape juice, to simply, but powerfully assert to you: nothing can happen to you these next 40 days and even forever to separate you from the love of God, in Christ Jesus, our Lord. So, for that Greatest News for this season of Lent and well, well beyond, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!