

Ashes without glitter

I'm a queer Christian pastor, and I'll be using regular, old, boring ashes like always.

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“Are you doing glitter ashes this year?”

A friend asked me that last year, before Ash Wednesday. A new trend has emerged of mixing the regular burnt palm ashes of centuries with glitter, a thoroughly modern invention.

“No,” I said. “We’ll just have regular, old, boring ashes like always.”

My friend was deflated. They thought I’d be hopping on the glitter bandwagon. After all, the point of glitter ashes is to raise awareness of LGBTQ acceptance by Christian churches. It’s meant to be a statement of inclusion, writ large on the foreheads of the masses.

As a queer Christian, I can certainly get behind making our welcome to LGBTQ people more public. I know what it’s like to be rejected and hurt by a homophobic and transphobic church. We need to be publicly repenting for the way LGBTQ people have been treated by our churches. But glitter ashes aren’t the way to do it.

Being visibly queer and gender nonconforming in this world means risking death every day. Trans people in particular are killed in troubling numbers. LGBTQ people are more susceptible to addiction and suicide, too. We know what it is to live at the intersection of life and death all too well.

Death is a deeply uncomfortable topic for everyone, and Ash Wednesday brings it home in a stark way. My sense is that glitter ashes are so appealing to some because they lighten what seems like a depressing church observance. I don’t think that’s what most LGBTQ people need, though. We need a church that won’t deny the reality of death, or try to make it prettier, but will instead meet us in the hardest places and tell us that there is hope there for us.

The radical message of Ash Wednesday is that we are marked as Christ’s own. Each of us will one day return to dust; we cannot avoid that. Ash Wednesday reminds us that when that day comes, Christ will claim us.

There is plenty of time for glitter in the days to come. Easter is the ultimate coming out party, when new life emerges from a place of death. In order for us to take that seriously, we have to let people grapple with what it means to be mortal. We don’t need glitter to do that. We just need enough space to bring the reality of our existence.