

February 10, Ash Wednesday: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

How on earth do we balance the quietness of our hearts with a public call to repentance?

by [Malinda Elizabeth Berry](#) in the [February 3, 2016](#) issue

Late in life, my mother-in-law had two Amish caregivers. Both women were friendly, and one talked openly about having divinely inspired dreams. But neither of them prayed out loud, opting instead for the privacy and intimacy of silence. This is a fairly common practice among Old Order Amish, based on their interpretation of Jesus' words in this week's Gospel reading: "Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

My own spiritual formation included some instruction about when to pray: at bedtime (out loud), at mealtimes (usually sung), and as often as appropriate during Sunday worship (introspective silence, long congregational prayers, "joys and concerns"). But I don't remember learning much about how to pray—and I suspect this absence had something to do with my Sunday school teachers' desire for the authentic spirituality Jesus preaches about here. Having been taught by the previous, traditionalist generation how to pray by citing chapter and verse, my baby boomer teachers shifted their focus to the sunny side of discipleship.

As I enter midlife and consider my own child's formation in our Anabaptist/Mennonite home, I find myself dismayed by how difficult it is for us adults to talk about how we balance piety with other aspects of Christian praxis. As a theologian, I'm rather insistent that sound logic and studied scriptural interpretation be an integral part of our piety. But in my faith community, so many of us seem to tote around internalized lists of do's and don'ts. How can a passage like Matthew 6 become strange to us, so we can be seized by Jesus' instruction and its significance in our time?

"Lent is not tidy," writes Peter Mazar in his introduction to *A Lent Sourcebook*. The word *Lent* is related in its origins to both *spring* and *lengthen*; it is when the ground

thaws and the daylight hours increase. “Our windows need washing,” says Mazar, “our temples need cleansing, the Earth itself needs a good bath.” Those of us who live in the watersheds of the Great Lakes can testify to Mazar’s observation that “winter doesn’t leave without blustery battles that push things over and mess things up and even break things. Lent, if we honestly face its fury, will leave the landscape littered with bits and pieces of ourselves.”

In other words, our annual Lenten journey involves reckoning with life’s external and internal storms. I want to accept my responsibility for my sin, complicity, and hard-heartedness so that I may be counted among the faithful. I want to express my faith with authenticity and sincerity before the watching world. I want the Holy Spirit to help me bridge the existential gap between my external and internal selves.

This passage from the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus urges his listeners to consider their giving, praying, fasting, and wealth building, has a lot of wisdom in it. But reading it on Ash Wednesday—and pairing it with the proclamation of Joel 2—makes Jesus’ instruction to carry out our religious practices in relative privacy land with irony and paradox. The imposition of ashes is surely a public display of piety, and this seems to be precisely what Joel’s word from God is calling for. How on earth do we balance the quietness of our hearts with our participation in a very public call to repentance? How on earth can we be sure that we wear these ashes with a right spirit in us?

Maybe the answer is in the medium of the message: in the earth.

Walking with Jesus to the cross isn’t tidy; it’s dirty, dusty, and bloody. The liturgical declaration from Genesis 3:19—“Remember, human, that you are dust, and to dust you will return”—brings to mind the Hebrew wordplay *Adam/adamah* and its English corollary *human/humus*. At the heart of Jesus’ call to humility is red earth, soil and blood. Our willingness to humbly submit ourselves to God’s forgiveness and goodness is only as good as our awareness that we are formed from the earth—and sustained by it.

Human from humus: be humble. Don’t just look for private places to express your piety. Look for wild spaces to be religious in.

In *Life Abundant*, Sallie McFague writes that “wild space is the shocking suggestion—even if only a suspicion—that all really are invited to the banquet, that every creature deserves a place at the table.” McFague’s wild dreaming leads to a

question: “Could the wild space become the whole space—the household of planet Earth where each of us takes only our share, cleans up after ourselves, and keeps the house in good repair for future dwellers?”

Maybe this year, we should mix the palm ashes with soil gathered from wild places. “Sometimes the only antidote is to take more of the poison,” writes Mazar. “On our foreheads we rub dirt: Eden gone to ashes, the dustbin emptied of a winter’s worth of soot, last year’s leaves riddled with worms, the broken earth turned by the plow, the dry earth thirsty for water to make it clay of a new creation.” Marking ourselves with actual humus, actual soil—it’s a silent prayer for all to see, alive with microbes, nutrients, and life.