

Marked with each other's deaths (Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51:1-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21)

We each have to face mortality alone—but also together.

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In one way, Ash Wednesday is the loneliest and most isolating of Christian liturgies. And appropriately so. Each and all of us have this in common: mortality. And each and all of us, one way or the other, have to face that grim reality alone.

Unless we don't. At least, not precisely.

Yes, the Hebrew Bible texts for the day are a dirge, a grim cadence of political and military calamity (Joel 2) and existential agony and atomizing desperation (Psalm 51). But the New Testament lessons attempt a possible response, hinting at the kind of community that can help us share the struggle and endure it all together (2 Corinthians 5–6). The caveat is that our individual and corporate practices must be testimonies of vulnerability instead of self-congratulatory spectacle (Matthew 6).

On the one hand there is no escape from the forces, internal or external, that separate us from God and one another. Complicity, shame, fear, and hypocrisy are clear and present threats to both life and life together. Ashes are the official sign and symbol of our wretchedness: "From dust you came, to dust you will return; repent and believe the gospel."

But when we hear the clarion, sense the summons, and answer the call to solemn assembly—that is, to gather, to confess, to pray, to fast—we take on each other's fears and isolations, and we walk not alone but together. That does not mean that we are each practicing our piety before others to be seen by them. It means that we are sharing the acknowledgment that even now, below the rubble of confession, there may lie treasure and blessing.

In just such a spirit, Becky, a frail and failing member of my church, was determined to attend our third Ash Wednesday service of the day. As I stood before her, the pad of my thumb was already black and gritty with the incinerated remains of last year's palm fronds. I knew from long experience that it would take me several days' worth of Lenten handwashings—longer than it would take the confessing faithful to wash the cross off their foreheads—for me to remove from my fingerprint the last bits of ritual evidence of our congregation's mortality. And my own.

A mostly unconsidered oddity of the “from dust you came” moment is its reflexivity: Each time I smudged a cross onto the forehead of a kneeling sinner, their forehead pressed a bit more ash onto my thumb.

Another: Each imposition carried with it residue from prior impositions. The result? Ritually, formally, over the course of those holy moments I signified to each of the penitents their isolating mortality, while practically, literally, unwittingly, each of those imposed shared their deaths with me and the rest of the congregation. By the time the impositions were done, we were all of us marked with each other’s deaths, as well as our own, and with the death of Jesus.

If the ashes were a gritty anticipation of what must come to all who breathe, they also signified a treasure uniquely discovered by the faithful: a shared invitation to find hope in repentance and faith and community.

If that was true for all who knelt at the rail, it was especially and obviously true for Becky. She and I both knew that she was, in all likelihood, attending her last Ash Wednesday service. She was tiny, frail, carried a portable oxygen pack—a consequence from decades of heavy smoking. She was also one of the dearest souls ever to grace my charge. My own breath caught when I saw her husband helping her to kneel. (Several others hovered close, in case they were needed to get her down or up.)

And when I stood before her bowed head, it was I who could barely breathe. She and I both knew her time was near. That she would, in fact, soon return to dust. I reached my hand down to lift her chin toward me. I said the words. She said, “Amen.” And the moment passed. But the moment would come, and the truth remained.

Together we had expressed ritually and experienced humanly the bad news and the good news of the faith we proclaim in word, sacrament, and ritual, even in the face of inescapable realities.