

Given my retirement later this year, it has occurred to me that this might be...the *last* Ash Wednesday service I will officiate in my ministry. So I am taking this awareness on...not as an occasion to be sad...but as an *invitation*...to see if I can see these things we commonly do in church together...to see them anew...to get more to the heart of the matter...as God may give me grace.

So one of the things I have tacitly noticed for years about Ash Wednesday...but have not put into words...is that it seems to me...that this is one of the *wordiest* services in the entire prayer book! The scripture readings for this day are *long*...and then after this homily (which will *not* be long)...there is a traditional invitation to the observance of the season of Lent which takes some time. And after the imposition of ashes there will be a *long* unison reading of Psalm 51. And then a *long* Litany of Penitence...and all that before we've even arrived at the familiarly *long* Eucharistic prayer. Which leads me to wonder: *What's going on here? What's up with all this wordiness?*

And I have to wonder if perhaps...there has long been an unstated awareness...going back to the wisdom of the earliest days of the Church...that so many words are needed...in order to break through the ice...so to speak...of all kinds of hardened defenses and lies perpetuated by this wayward world which gets embedded in us...that would keep us deaf...to the truth of God. These are words to...if necessary...*exhaust us* into a recognition of God's truth about us.

- I mean, what if we lived in a world where human beings could recognize their own sin *first*...before focusing so hatefully on the sin of others?
- What if we could be able to have a *common sorrow* for all our sins...that could humble us together...even despite our divisions?
- What if *death*...was not actually a medical failure...but a *metaphysical challenge*...for us to recover the wisdom of numbering our days...so that we could be truthful about our lives...and recognize how much we truly do need God to forgive us...and make us new?
- What if our sin and our deaths...are mysterious truths that we have to navigate sooner or later...in order to find ourselves near to Our Father...who graciously awaits us?

Well, these are just *so many more words added to words*. Maybe a word or two somewhere in all these our prayers to today...might *chisel* a crack through the ice. Or maybe not, today.

But then there are...the *ashes*. The ashes will be prayed over...that they “may be to us a sign of our *mortality* and *penitence*.”

Honestly, I can never get used to the ashes. They have never been just something customary.

Where words may fail...there are ashes....*to awaken us to the hard truth of our life in the world*.

But not just the *hard truth*...because that is not the ultimate destination...*but something more*.

There is a completely unexpected *tenderness* in the ashes...a *compassion*. I'm surprised every time. And I believe that that *comes from God*...Our Father.

This God...who can bless ashes...is our ultimate destination...together.