

**My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,**

**There is a certain morbidity to Ash Wednesday. At its core it serves to remind us that we are weak, sinful people who are doomed to die. How's that for an uplifting message!**

**All of us would like to think that we will live forever. Indeed, we will; but not in this life. This desire for immortality pervades our whole society. We are still looking for the fountain of youth. We don't speak of nursing homes or even retirement communities anymore. Now the real estate market refers to active adult communities.**

**A friend of mine was recently approached by her adult son who thought it was time to prepare his mother for the inevitable. He said, "Mom, you know you're no longer a spring chicken and we ought to talk about what the future holds for you. Do you think we should talk about making arrangements for...you know...when, ah...you pass on?" My friend just looked at her son with amusement and said nothing. The young man said, "I know it's a kind of delicate subject, but it's important to know what you would want in the future—like would you prefer to be buried or do you want to be cremated?" After another long pause, his Mother said with a sweet smile, "Oh, Son, why don't you just surprise me."**

**Death is a difficult subject. We would prefer to disguise it, ignore it, pretend it doesn't exist. And most of us don't want to admit it can happen to us.**

**Ash Wednesday comes around every year to remind us that we are just dust and we will become dust once again. It also comes as a reminder that we are weak and sinful people.**

**The story is told of a man who had been in a terrible accident. Although bleeding profusely, with obvious bruises, the man assured everyone that he was alright. A police officer on the scene said, "Sir, you've been in a really bad accident. You really should go to the hospital and get checked out for internal damage." The man was adamant, "There's nothing wrong with me. I'm going home." Again, the police officer said, "Look, the ambulance is right here. Go to the hospital and let the doctors have a look. It won't take long." The man was even more insistent, "There's nothing wrong with me." The man's wife arrives; he gets in the car; goes home; and an hour later dies of internal bleeding."**

**"There's nothing wrong with me," can be a dangerous thing to say. Spiritually, it is probably the worst thing a person can say. For a person to stand before God and say, "There's nothing wrong with me," is totally incompatible with our Christian faith and it certainly has to be unacceptable to God.**

**Ash Wednesday reminds us that we are all weak and sinful people. The amazing thing is that even though we are aware of our weaknesses and sinful conditions, we hold on to them. We refuse to let them go.**

**It's like the young boy who jumped on to the bumper of his Dad's truck to hitch a short ride across the yard. His father didn't see him. The truck hit a bump and the boy slid down to the ground, but held on to the bumper, screaming his heart out. Finally, the Dad heard him; stopped the truck and ran back; picked the boy up and saw though he was bruised and dirty, he wasn't seriously hurt. The father then asked the obvious question, "Why didn't you let go?"**

**My dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, that's the question that God will probably ask us one day. Why didn't you let go of your bad habits? Why didn't you let go of your pride? Why didn't you let go of your anger? Why didn't you let go of your hateful attitude and your mindless prejudices? Why didn't you let go of your lust or your jealousy? Why didn't you let go of your fear and your shame?**

**Yes, we are marked with ashes today as our reminder that we are weak and sinful people who will one day die. But, that's only half of the story of Ash Wednesday.**

**Ash Wednesday also tells us the story of God's mercy. Because we have a merciful God we are redeemed by a God who wants to reconcile us to Himself. According to our Scripture tonight, "For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him."**

**What this means, in effect, is that our sins are canceled by the death of Christ on the cross so that we might be reconciled with God. Because Jesus paid the price for our wrongdoing, nothing stands between us and God, our Loving Father.**

**We need to take care, however, not to take this work of reconciliation too lightly or take it for granted. This reconciliation was costly to God. He paid an awesome price. Think about it! God who took on the frailty of our human nature in the person of His Son, Jesus the Nazarene, did not deem his equality with God as something to be held on to; to be grasped at, but emptied himself to take on the form of a slave.**

**As a result, we are the only religion in the history of the world that worships a God who gets hurt; gets stabbed; gets beaten and whipped and spat upon; a God who writhes in pain on a criminal's cross and bears the wounds of nail and spear that tore at bone and muscle; nerve and flesh. We have a God who suffers unbearably for our sake, even experiencing separation from his own self for our sake: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me."**

**His suffering was not imaginary; it was not make believe or fake. The cross on which hung the Savior of the world was real. That cross became the regal throne of our Merciful God.**

**There's another story told of a young boy who worked in his father's carpentry shop in Jerusalem. Their principal products were crosses and caskets. One day the father comes in and sees his son crying. He asks, "What's wrong?" The boy answers, "I went to the market place and I saw Jesus of Nazareth, the teacher we love to hear, and he was carrying the cross we made in our shop. They took him to Golgatha and nailed Him to our cross." His father said, "Oh, no, Son, that wasn't our cross. Other people in Jerusalem build crosses. That wasn't our cross." "Oh, yes it was!" the boy cried, "When you weren't looking, I carved my name on the cross that we were making. When Jesus was carrying his cross, he stumbled right beside me, and I looked, and my name was on his cross!"**

**My dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, Ash Wednesday reminds us that each of us constructed the cross on which Christ died. Our names too are carved on that cross. And it is by that Cross on which Jesus hung that we are redeemed and reconciled to our Merciful God, "For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him might not perish, but might have eternal life."**