

Ash Wednesday
Morning homily
February 10, 2016
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
The Rev. Ian C. Burch

One of my oldest friends was a pastor at a large church with a school attached. She was the junior pastor in the parish, and she had responsibilities for the religion education of all the students in the school. As part of her duties, she held weekly chapel services, always on a Wednesday.

Naturally, every year on Ash Wednesday, she ended up leading a service where she found herself putting ashes on the foreheads of dozens of 3–6 year olds. Imagine this line of little children coming up the aisle to receive ashes and the admonition, “remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Then imagine that same line of children, walking back to their seats, with that black mark of our faith on their foreheads.

What are we, as Christians, saying about the world when we confess to one another in public that our nature is as dust, as dirt. What are we saying when we say the same thing about the youngest members of our parish family?

I think we are trying to wrestle with something that is true but also kind of scary—that these bodies of ours can be tricky. We can think wrongly, speak wrongly, act wrongly, love wrongly. We can get into a whole lot of trouble—and do—in these bodies of ours. And then, after a life that can be hard, we will die.

These aren't pleasant thoughts. And they certainly aren't thoughts that we want to think about when we see little angelic faces in a church service. But the wisdom of the church over the ages has set aside this day, this moment, to remember the difficult parts of being human—the wretchedness, the sin, the sadness and neglect--all of it.

We will explore all of these difficult places over these next 40 days as we follow Jesus on his path in the wilderness to the cross. And today, we will go through the world, marked by the ashes that help us remember our mortality, our limited natures—a reminder to ourselves and to others.

My friend, the pastor, worked in that church for about 8 years. And she noticed that she was starting to get some kids in school on Ash Wednesday who she had actually baptized. She was the one who put the sign of the cross on their heads in oil when they were babies. And here she was putting the sign of the cross on their heads in ashes when they were school aged. And if that doesn't speak to the nature of the Christian life, I don't know what does

The Christian witness won't quite let us fall into our despair, into our sin, completely. The sign on our heads are ashes. But they're in the shape of a cross. The exact shape that the priest made on our heads at our baptisms. Even as we explore what it means to be sinners, God continues to name us saints. Amen.