

## **Sermon for Ash Wednesday 2010 – St. Francis**

A couple of years ago, while I was still serving at Hospice of Chattanooga, one of our doctors expressed her desire to receive the imposition of ashes in a most unusual manner. She admitted that her full patient load that day had prevented her from attending the early morning Ash Wednesday liturgy at her church. Still, she maintained she needed those ashes on her forehead. She needed them so much that when a co-worker who had been able to attend worship that morning passed by her with the black cross of ashes still visible on her forehead the doctor ran over to this co-worker and pressed her forehead to the other woman's forehead so that some of the co-worker's ashes were now on the doctor's forehead. It's an image that remains vivid in my mind. Forehead to forehead; ashes to ashes; now shared between two companions who lived to serve the dying.

I suspect I am not the only one here who has been questioned about why Lent is so important to us, that we come together to receive ashes on our forehead. Some may intimate that this practice seems macabre. To many people the practices of Lent seem to be full of do nots and sacrifices in which we are focused on all that is wrong in life. "Why would you want to remind yourself of such a horrible thing as death," they ask. I would argue that by keeping a Holy Lent we learn more about the joy of living the life we have.

Five years of serving as a Hospice Chaplain helped me realize more about what is truly important in life. The joy of a moment shared with someone dear to you becomes far more important than any possession you own when you realize how precious few of such shared moments remain. Our challenge is to understand that reality before it is forced upon us. We live in a world which often communicates that clothes and belongings define a person. In God's world we are reminded that how we love God and how we love our neighbor are what truly define who we are. Our world tells us that to do "without" something is a form of "suffering". But Jesus says, "When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face". In other words live life even in the midst of fasting and you will understand more about how much you have been given.

Lent is an opportunity -- an opportunity to see with fresh eyes how much God has given us as we "give something up" only to realize how much we still have. Lent is an opportunity to take something on such as regular prayer and intentional giving of time, of treasure, of self, to serve another and to know the joy that comes with giving. Lent is an opportunity to enter afresh in our efforts to live as a true child of God.

In a moment, when I trace with ashes once again the cross that was placed on your forehead in Baptism, remember that you are joined with Christ in life and in death. Remember that we are joined one with another in our lives in Christ as we share the mark of ashes on our forehead. Enter into Lent with a sense of anticipation that in this 40 day journey we can quietly live in ways that we want our Father in heaven to see. Give something up, take something on, and as you do know that you are truly marked as Christ's own forever.