

Ash Wednesday

Sunday morning, 3 days ago, I held Patrick William McNamara in my arms and baptized him in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and then, using the sweet smelling oil of chrism blessed by the Bishop, I made the sign of the cross with my thumb on his forehead. *“Patrick, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.”*

Like little Patrick, each of us has received incredible gifts from God in our baptisms. We are promised new life in an eternal covenant. We are given the gift of the Holy Spirit. We are adopted into a new family with God as our Father, Jesus our brother and each other as sisters and brothers in Christ. We are cleansed and forgiven of our sins. We start a new life and a new birth. Like Patrick, each of us received incredible gifts. And, like Patrick, all those gifts were sealed when the sign of the cross was made on our foreheads. *“You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.”* Each of us bears that wonderful seal.

In a few minutes we will have the opportunity to come forward and to receive the same sign of the cross on our foreheads, but with different words and a different context. Using the charred remains of palms once waved in procession on Palm Sunday the clergy will make the sign of the cross on each forehead – whether to a young child, an elderly person, or someone in the prime of life – and to each one we will say, *“remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”* This is a very different sign, not of God’s great blessings, but a sign of our humanity. The one certain thing that each of us has in common is that we will each die; our time on earth is finite.

We do our best to deny, to avoid, to hide and to run away from the truth those ashes represent. Advertisement’s glittering promises – beautiful young models posturing in every kind of pose, mouth-wateringly scrumptious looking food, powerful, sleek or fast cars, revitalizing beverages, remedies to make us feel better and live longer, creams, perfumes, hair dyes, soaps and lotions to make us less wrinkled and more beautiful – all these are a denial of those ashes. They promise us strength, vitality, sex appeal, beauty, youth, wealth, prestige, power, importance, pleasure, and the like. Are they not all a running away from the words of Ash Wednesday – *“remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return?”*

Almost 35 years ago the rock group *Kansas* had a hit song called *“Dust in the Wind.”*

*I close my eyes, only for a moment, and the moment’s gone
All my dreams, pass before my eyes, a curiosity
Dust in the wind, all they are is dust in the wind.
Same old song, just a drop of water in an endless sea
All we do, crumbles to the ground, though we refuse to see*

Dust in the wind, all we are is dust in the wind

Like a lot of old rock bands Kansas is still performing their reliable old material. But in another 35 years they certainly will be little more than *dust in the wind*. For now *Dust in the Wind* keeps getting airtime on the classic rock stations. It has always been a great Ash Wednesday theme song.

In 2 Corinthians 4:7 Paul writes that “*we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.*” The incredible treasure of good news in Jesus Christ, promised us in baptism, received in hope and faith, tasted in Holy Communion and joyous worship, lived in new life and expressed in faithful ministry. We have this incredible treasure in clay jars – in chipped, cracked, fragile earthenware pitchers. We carry and embody the treasure of life in Christ in our sinful, imperfect human containers.

That is what Ash Wednesday is a reminder of. God’s incredible treasure is contained in these clay jars – in these temporary vessels that began as dust and will end as dust. The whole point is to remind us that God is the treasure – God’s Son, God’s Kingdom, God’s values, God’s presence, God’s life. The point is to drive us to our knees realizing how short and temporary life is. “*Now,*” as Paul wrote a few paragraphs later and we heard in the Epistle lesson, “*now is the acceptable time, ...now is the day of salvation!*”

What do we need to do in our lives, in our practice of our faith, in the daily Lenten disciplines we’re invited to begin, in order to treasure God’s gifts? What do we need to do to let those gifts grow in us?

Remember that you are sealed in the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever. Remember also that you are dust and to dust you shall return.