

Receiving Ashes on Ash Wednesday is a real, tangible, and embodied reminder of our fundamental identity: that we were formed from the dust of this earth, and to that we will return, and the ashes remind us that our life, all life, is of God, from God, and for God. We all know this, but in our daily lives these truths are very hard to hold always in our awareness. Rather than keeping these truths always before us, interpreting the world around us through them, and allowing these truths to guide all of our being and doing, these truths tend to get bumped somewhat to the periphery ... and *this* is how we separate ourselves from God, the source and purpose of our lives.

Life is all too often too busy and too full. There are too many things that clank and clatter calling for our attention. Our life stories are complex, with relationships that stretch and challenge us, commitments and responsibilities that make demands on our time and on our energy. And we have material needs, we've got to make sure we're fed and housed, that we can pay for things we need, that we get our taxes get done. And the world cries out with suffering and injustices, and unrelenting violence. It is no wonder our fundamental identity slips from view, when so much we need to pay attention to.

But when God gets pushed to the edges, when the truth of our own bodily mortality gets pushed to the edges, when we lose sight of what we are and *why* we are, we risk orienting instead to the stories pushed on us by the culture we live in, with the all-important life-limiting myth of self-sufficiency underpinning them all, and that will be fraught – believing in and investing in the myth of self-sufficiency, we risk the distortions of pride or hubris when things are going really well, and the terrible burdens of guilt, shame, and feelings of failure when things in our life go awry. The myth of self-sufficiency is grotesquely enmeshed with self-righteousness, and that lurks menacingly behind the pernicious impulse to judge, critique, correct, and claim power over ... power over our own selves, and power and control over others.

Our country is dangerously organized around this founding myth, and we are now, as we have been for a long time, wrestling with the consequences of centering our lives around ideas and things that are not of God (rooted in love and justice and abundance of life for all), ideas and things that do not prioritize provision for all from our great abundance, but instead push the belief that only the strongest and most powerful deserve to survive and thrive.

So as you enter into this season of Lent, this wilderness season, this season of fasting and self-denial, of repentance and meditation on God's Holy Word, please, *please* ... do it with love. Love of your own self, your own body, and with an uncompromising love of neighbor that truly has the power to change the world; and, of course, with a focused and determined love of God as the very center of it all.

This is not a season for a punishing decimation of the will by the will, or a brutal beating up of the body, this is not a season of violence; this is season to re-orient toward the truth of our lives in God. It's a season of restoration of relationship, a season of reaching for wholeness. And that's what it makes it such a hard season, as we set down our habits of thinking and doing and continue on - emptied of our standard/stock responses to life, to others and to the world around us, we become fully aware of the agonizing reality that we must learn new ways, learn new life-giving ways to stay grounded in love and in God, despite it all.

We are living in hard times, we are suffering, we are surrounded by suffering. Lent, in all the ways we are reminded of our essential nature, our interconnected-ness, our interdependence, that all life is from and for God, Lent can be a season of great hope as we set our intention on reconciliation and restoration and newness of life.

And hope, in times such as these, can be hard.

May the struggles of your Lenten fast, your Lenten observances, be for you a process of discovery, and ultimately a source of new life. This holy season is set aside for us to discover true strength and true power as we turn our hearts and minds toward God, the very ground of our being. May we feel joy in our struggles this season, knowing our discomforts and our agonies are birth pangs ... new life is arising!