

Dear friends in Christ



March 2, 2022
Ash Wednesday

“Ashes, Ashes, All Fall Down”

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Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 103:8-14; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

A rather unusual experience happened to me one sometime past at the grocery store. Our local store was in the process of being remodeled, and the location of virtually everything has been changed. I'm not sure why this was necessary, but I go in there and can't find anything. I spend so much time and energy just looking for the items on my list that I can't even impulse-shop anymore.

As I was searching up one aisle and then another for a household cleaner, I spied a young woman, a sort of plain looking person in what would seem to be her early twenties with two children hanging on her. She reminded me of someone from what my mother used to call “the projects.” Being as young as she was, she looked ill-kempt and tired. She turned around to see me hurriedly looking down the aisle for the next item on my list, and for some reason she seemed to think I was looking at her, while in reality I was straining to see past her.

I soon forgot the whole incident until, while standing in the check-out line, I sensed someone sidling up to me on the other side of the chrome bar. It was that young mother. She wanted to know if I could help out with some money for her groceries. As I started to speak, a tall, thin - an older woman in a shabby black dress, with her gray hair done up in a bun, from the next checkout stand over called out, "We're thirteen dollars short."

I was soon going home to a hearty meal, and my conscience began to nag, "Well, what would it hurt to help out a little bit? What did Jesus say? 'Give to all who ask?'" Actually, I don't know if Jesus said that or not. But I figured it wouldn't hurt to help out. I certainly could spare thirteen dollars for Christ's sake, and for the sake of her family.

I was now approaching the cashier. Some people nearby were starting to stare at us, this older guy being importuned by this strange young woman. But I really didn't mind. I was determined to help. One person behind me hissed, sotto voce to a friend, "you've gotta watch those kinda people."

I really didn't mind helping. I really didn't. I was okay with it. Figure it was my good deed for the day. But it didn't seem to end there.

As I paid the cashier and prepared to put my bags of groceries in my cart, there she was again, wondering if I could take her and her family home. They only lived a short distance away, right behind Home Depot. Her mother had difficulty walking, and it would be a big help if I would drive them. Well, I guess I could do a little more. Oh, and one more thing, could I give her a little money for the week. I pulled another five-dollar bill from my wallet. I turned my head just in time to see her step over to the line to buy a pack of cigarettes as her mother was

asking where my car might be. Now, I was getting a little annoyed. While I didn't mind paying for the family to have something to eat, I definitely wasn't interested in helping her purchase a pack of "coffin sticks" so she could smoke herself and her family to death.

Getting into my car is something of an experience. This was back when I still had my old Buick. I'm really not set up for passengers. On the floor in the front is my stack of stuff for my construction business. In the back seat were some lamps for the church in big boxes. On the back floor on one side is a pile of papers for our youth group. In the trunk are all the paper goods like cups and napkins and stuff I need for youth group meetings (my mechanic actually wondered one day if I was living out of my car. Maybe he'd thought my wife had thrown me out. I suppose some days I wouldn't blame her – but that's another story). Then strewn around are some bottles of antacid, a plastic container of dental floss, an umbrella, some dead straws and a McDonald's cup, and two very large church posters. My oldest son had the nerve one day to tell me that my car looked more like a motorized dumpster! He once asked, "Dad does the landfill company pay you to store their stuff in your trunk?"

Well, somehow, I made room for my newly found entourage with all their baggage, and yes, the cigarettes – that was still grating.

On the way home the grandmother, sitting in the front seat, is telling me about having lost her husband last year and how things have been very difficult. Her daughter in the back seat with the boy on her lap, next to the boxes of lamps and young woman is saying something about how maybe I could give her my phone number so she could call me sometimes during the week. We could see each other. She'd like that. I averred that that wouldn't be such a good idea as I had my own life

and she had her's. By this time the mother was going on about what her daughter really needed was a boyfriend.

Whoa. Time out! As I held up my left hand, prominently pointing to my wedding ring, I assured them that I was already happily married. Moaned the daughter, "See, Mom, the good ones are always taken."

We couldn't have arrived any sooner, to my way of reckoning, to a run-down looking house with a dead lawn and the front door hanging open. As I helped the grandmother sort out her remaining bags of groceries from all my stuff in the trunk, she spotted my packages of napkins and paper plates. Maybe I could help out a little more. They could use some paper towels and things. "Sure," I said, handing them to her and trying not to sound too annoyed. By this time I just wanted to get out of there before her daughter came back again. And maybe I could help out a little with the electric bill. "Why not," I wearily responded. By this time the twenty-dollar bill I'd gotten for the week had evaporated.

As I drove off, finally glad to be rid of this very needy group of people, a woman suddenly drove up in front of me and abruptly stopped her car. It seems that she'd seen all that had gone on with us at the grocery store and had just wondered if I had gotten out of it without being mugged or anything. I thanked her for her solicitousness, assuring her that I really, really hadn't minded helping.

On my way home, I thanked my lucky stars that I had married someone who was so sensible, and not a complete and utter flake.

But as I got to thinking more and more about this out-of-the-blue mini-adventure, I was forced to acknowledge those times in my life that I have been just as flaky, just as desperate, just as needy – maybe in a

different sort of way. I began to reflect on how it is, ultimately, that we all come before God in not much better shape than this desperate and out-of-control young mother. Being, more sophisticated, I'm just better at hiding it. But, ultimately, you and I, we all come before God with very empty hands. As the song says, we all arrive at the throne of heaven with a "broken alleluia."

On Ash Wednesday, that is what we at the bottom of it all, are here to acknowledge – our absolute, and utter need for God. That God-shaped hole in our lives, as Augustine calls it, that nothing, nothing but God can ultimately fill, though we so often attempt to fill it with all kinds of stuff or addictive behaviors.

We come to this rail in our common humanity, remembering that we are but dust, and to dust we do return. There are no do-overs. I, that young mother, her two kids and their grandmother, yes, poor and needy, we all come. Lord, have mercy upon us all. And we come hoping and trusting in our heart of hearts that there might be some saving mercy indeed, even for the likes of us. Even for those desperate souls in Ukraine. So begins our forty days wilderness journey of Lent. Amen.