

**Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 3/1/06**  
**St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York**  
**Ash Wednesday (Text: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21)**

The Gospel lesson appointed for Ash Wednesday always takes me by surprise. Jesus' instructions couldn't be clearer – his disciples are not to call attention to themselves when practicing piety. Doesn't it seem odd, then, that in our liturgy we would follow these words of Jesus with our tradition of marking our foreheads with ashes, which everyone will then see as we leave this place? Jesus said, "Wash your face so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret..." Why, then, do we deliberately mark our foreheads, which will, most likely, call attention to ourselves?

Jesus' concern seems to be about the intention behind the practice. The purpose of all of our acts of devotion, whether praying, giving generously, fasting, or receiving ashes are intended, simply, to be our heartfelt response to a loving God. Lent is a season in which we have the opportunity to acknowledge God's presence and work in our lives, and our all-too-frequent distraction from that reality. These forty days that lay before us are a time for us to return, again and again, to God – creator, redeemer, and sustainer of life.

We're returning to God not in order to gain God's favor – we already have that. We're returning to God not to justify ourselves before God – that's not necessary. We're undertaking deliberate acts of devotion during Lent only to draw closer to God, whose love upholds us and surrounds us.

For most of us, the sign of the cross in ashes upon our forehead is a stark symbol of the uncertainty of life, the inevitability of death, and our inability to save ourselves. One priest put it this way: "We are dust and yet, because of God, we live."\* We don't feel the ashes on our forehead, and soon after receiving them, we might forget that they're there. And then we catch sight of our reflection, and we're startled to see that ashen cross. And in that moment, we remember: We are dust and yet, because of God, we live."

The purpose of fasting is to remind us that we are completely dependent on God. When we feel those hunger pangs, we remember: It is only God who feeds us.

The purpose of giving beyond our usual practice reminds us that all that we have is a gift from God. In giving generously, we remember: What we grasp as our own isn't ours at all. It's God's, and it's to be shared with those who have less.

Receiving the sign of the cross in ashes upon our forehead today is our first Lenten act of devotion. This ritual isn't intended to impress others; its purpose is to draw us, again, to God. Let us consider carefully which other specific practices will draw us closer to God, and then commit to that discipline during these forty days. This season of self-examination and repentance is a gift – an opportunity to return, again and again, to God. Amen.\*

\* Mary Frances Schjonberg, *Preaching Through Holy Days and Holidays*