

This Ash Wednesday I feel ready for Lent in a way I haven't in a long time. I feel ready because, not only does Lent arrive late this year, but this past weekend we hosted and heard from Fr. Greg Boyle of Los Angeles, the founder of the largest gang rehabilitation program in the world and the author of several books including *Tattoos on the Heart*. And Fr. Greg moved us with stories of love and forgiveness...and convinced me (and many of us) of the power of kinship and compassion - a power that we often underestimate. But a lot of his stories were just plain funny. During his talk on Saturday, Fr. Greg shared with us one of his favorite Lenten stories about one of the homegirls who came up to Fr. Greg on Ash Wednesday and told him about how she had discovered that her boyfriend had been cheating on her. Fr. Greg shook his head and offered words of sorrow and comfort, but she responded, "Oh - don't worry about it - I got those ashes on my forehead, and I gave him up for Lent!"

What are you giving up and taking on this year for Lent? Fr. Greg reminded us that when we spend time with God and learn to really accept God's love for us, just as God made us - we become aware of God's "tender glance" towards us...and then we in turn can and offer the tender glance to others. That's what I want to practice doing this Lent, embracing and extending the tender glance. What about you?

Back when Adam and Eve sinned in the garden by eating the forbidden fruit, God said to them, "From dust you were made and to dust you will return." Most of us recognize this phrase because not only do we recall these words at the time of burial, but those are the words spoken when we impose the cross of ashes on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." This statement reminds us of several things: The first is that God made us - God is our Creator and our lives are in God's hands. The second is that we are made of the earth, of the dust, and our life here is finite, because we are mortal and we, our bodies, will return back to the earth and die. At times it's easy to forget this, but

we all need to live recognizing every day as a precious but temporary gift. Indeed, Fr. Blayney Colmore quoted Brian Doyle this week in his reflections, writing: "Every creature has approximately 2 billion heartbeats to spend in a lifetime. Spend them slowly, like a tortoise, and live to 200. Or fast, like a hummingbird, and live 2 years." And then Blayney writes, "Beyond human madness, war, pandemic, taxes...another dimension waits. A dimension not ruled by power, but by ancient energy, cementing our solidarity with fellow species. Casting light on the generous miracle of being here. How will you choose to spend your remaining heartbeats?" His reminder and question is ideal for Ash Wednesday and this season of Lent.

Finally, the reminder that we are dust and to dust we will return, invites us to a profound sense of humility in light of our frailty as humans, as people who error and make mistakes and end up needing to say we're sorry more times than we'd like. But this statement is not meant to be threatening, it is simply a sober and profound reminder of who we are, to help us to number our days, and to see each day as a gift from God and as an opportunity to grow closer to God and really use our remaining heartbeats doing God's will.

Ashes, on the other hand, have been a sign of repentance, mourning, and renewal throughout ancient times. Penitents would often wear ashes on their faces in the ancient world. To be a penitent simply means to be one who desires forgiveness. In the Hebrew Scriptures, including Job, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Samuel, Ezekiel, and Daniel, we read about people wearing ashes as a sign of their penitence. Jesus himself mentions ashes as a sign of repentance in Matthew chapter 11. In the Church, we can trace the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday all the way back to at least the 8th century, and so we stand today in a long and ancient line and tradition of having ashes imposed on our foreheads and wearing ashes as a sign of penitence.

While the imposition of ashes is not a sacrament, it is sacramental in that it symbolizes on the outside

what we mean to say from the inside, and the message is one of hope. Yes, we have sinned, we are broken, we are mortal, but we desire God, and we trust God's tender glance resting upon us - we trust the divine tender glance enough to seek healing, wholeness, and forgiveness. The ashes are meaningless if we don't align our hearts with the message and hope behind them. Historically, those who were estranged from the Church for whatever reason, would come back to the church on Ash Wednesday and be restored. And if that's true for you today – welcome back – God's tender glance is upon you. Ash Wednesday, in that sense, is like a home coming.

Today is a homecoming to ourselves, to our senses, to reality, to our deepest hopes and desires, to Church and most of all, to our tender God. In coming home, much like a prodigal son or daughter, we discover that God is already standing at the door, waiting for us with open and tender arms to bless, embrace, and forgive us, even before we ask. Ash Wednesday is ultimately a day of grace.

We who hunger for the living God know that Lent can be a season and a tool to help us find God. When we abstain from certain foods, when we fast, when we take on new disciplines and make sacrifices in Lent, it enables us to make more room for God. Today is the day of salvation, now is the time to be spiritually renewed and to be drawn more deeply into God's loving presence and accept the tender glance so that you can offer the tender glance to others.

My friends, today we cast off our fear, and we admit that we are all sinners, but we hunger to know God more deeply, and to know that we are loved and forgiven in Jesus Christ because grace has been poured out upon us all. And the tender glance of God is ours in Christ.

Thanks be to God!