

LENT



Dust Bunnies

I don't like dust, and I especially don't like dust bunnies. You know those mysterious furry things that lurk behind your bedroom door, or in your closet, or under your bed. Who knows how they got there? Who wants to know how they got there? But they're there, and I don't like them, especially when they move around. You've probably seen them do this: you open a door, look behind it, and the dust bunny catches just enough air that it seems to start hopping away.

Cleanliness may or may not be next to godliness but dust bunnies show up whether or not we're compulsive dusters. Even Mr. Clean himself occasionally sees dust bunnies in his pantry closet—and his clean-shaven, earring-wearing self is horrified.

So, it's not the most comforting thought in the world on Ash Wednesday when we receive the sign of the cross on our foreheads with the words, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

Fortunately, this doesn't turn us into walking, talking dust bunnies. God's not going to sweep us away with a giant feather duster. But the words of the Ash Wednesday service remind us that there is something greater out there, greater than what we can see with the naked eye, greater than our hopes, fears, and dreams. And that something is God. It's not that we're as insignificant, useless, and annoying as dust bunnies; it's just that the world doesn't revolve around dust, and it doesn't revolve around us. God is the center of all life and creation, which doesn't mean we're useless; we're just not in control.

Think about dust for a moment. There are two ways to create it, through inactivity and activity. If you go downstairs into the part of the basement that rarely gets used, the part where you store old boxes full of books or that pair of cross-country skis you've long since outgrown, you encounter dust. Run your finger along those skis and you get a tangible reminder that they haven't been used in ages. Your finger is suddenly covered with dust, and you might even sneeze once or twice.

Then there's the other way dust is created, through activity. That's how those dust bunnies in your bedroom came to be. Through the everyday activity of

life, you create dust. It comes in on your shoes or your clothes, or on the kids' backpacks. If we're not kicking up some dust, we're not really living.

Jesus encourages us to kick up some dust every now and then, to roll up our sleeves and get involved with the world and the people around us. We might get dirty every once in a while, but that's okay. Through our relationship with Jesus we are cleansed, renewed, and dusted off time and time again.

All of this is why I like to hold a children's Ash Wednesday service every year. Not many churches do this because there's a natural inclination to shield our kids from concepts like mortality and human sin. And the idea of dumping ashes on the heads of young children and telling them they'll eventually die gives some clergy the willies. But ignoring an important and integral part of life isn't the answer. You certainly don't have to spook children to make the point—though I do know a woman who went to Catholic school and for years was convinced that the ashes themselves came from the bones of dead nuns.

I simply like to make age-appropriate connections for children that hopefully lead to further questions. On Shrove Tuesday (aka Mardi Gras), we burn the palms from the previous Palm Sunday. At the next

day's Ash Wednesday service, I invite the children to sit with me as I use a mortar and pestle to create the ashes. As I grind the burnt palms and strain out the larger pieces, I talk about life, death, and resurrection. Then I administer the ashes on their foreheads. Rather than removing the mystery, I find this process draws them deeper into the story and makes the entrance into the season of Lent that much more tangible.



Of course, one year I had just imposed ashes at the children's service with the words "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return," when a little girl looked up and asked, "Pixie dust?" Sure. Why not?

Sinful Delight

“**S**inful Delight.” I saw this listed on a dessert menu recently, just under the crème brûlée. It was a concoction containing chocolate mousse, homemade whipped cream, and a few caramel swirls. In other words, not something you’d want to confront if you’d given up chocolate for Lent. But it got me thinking about how little we talk about sin these days. Sure, we’ll label a few items on the dessert tray “sinful,” but when it comes to confronting true sinfulness—that which separates us from God—we’ve already paid the check and started for home.

Sin is not a topic most of us care to discuss, yet if we fully and authentically enter into the season of Lent, we cannot avoid the subject of sin. Indeed in the Collect for Ash Wednesday, we pray that God may “create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness” (*The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 264).

Acknowledging our wretchedness doesn't sound like much fun, but it does emphasize the severity and depth of the issue. We are all sinners; it is part of who we are as human beings. To deny or minimize this fact is to deny or minimize God's capacity for mercy and forgiveness. We can't reflect on our sinfulness without also reflecting on God's loving providence, because even when we separate ourselves from God, God still desires us. Even when we fail to honor those in our midst, God still seeks healing, and even when we feel unlovable, God still loves us.

But sin is difficult to discuss. If we dwell too much on it, we negate the joy of life lived in the Spirit.

And if we take it too lightly, we risk a cheapened, rudderless faith. As in most things, striking the proper balance is key.



Sin needs to be acknowledged and confessed but always within the context of God's grace. Our job as faithful Christians is to come before God, not just saying the words of the confession on Sunday mornings but repenting in our hearts and showing forth that repentance through amendment of life. We say in the Rite I absolution, "Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who of his great mercy hath promised forgiveness of sins to all those who with hearty repentance and true faith turn unto him, have mercy upon you, pardon and deliver you from all your sins, confirm and strengthen you in all goodness, and bring you to everlasting life, through Jesus Christ our Lord" (*The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 332). The point of reflecting on our sins is that we grow and change, that we explore and deepen the salvific relationship with Jesus that is so graciously extended to each one of us.

So, unless you have given up chocolate for Lent, go ahead and order that "Sinful Delight." It may be a guilty pleasure, but it's certainly not sinful. If sin is that which separates us from God, dessert doesn't qualify. No matter how much it may separate us from our previous pants size.