

Ash Wednesday Meditation

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First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

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Stronger Than Dirt

When I was a kid, a neighbor passed on to our family a cat with no tail and no manners. Our neighbor must have known that the Calvert family had a long history

of tending pets and strays and adopting urban wildlife.

However, this cat in particular strained our capacity for love of God's creation.

My brothers named the cat Ajax because Ajax the Cat was "Stronger Than Dirt."

No amount of soap, perfume, or beauty cleansers eased its all-powerful aroma.

And we can testify to this day that no training sank in.

Clearly Ajax believed that the word housebroken

was meant to be taken literally, as in "*What in this house can I break next?*"

Ajax proved to be stronger than dirt.

We like to be clean.

We kid ourselves that we have the power to conquer dirt all by ourselves.

We invest great amounts of money and time and resources

to look nice, to smell nice, to be appealing and pleasing to one another.

We may even apologize if we break into a sweat.

I was a witness of two women college classmates who actually argued

over whether one of them was sweating while studying for a tough exam.

One said to the other, "*I don't sweat; I glow.*"

As much as we scrub, swipe and swab on the outside,

what we crave is to be clean from the inside out.

We seek and pray for God and the whole people of God

to help us attain that most precious of gifts:

to be healed and washed, purified and sanctified,

to be renewed and forgiven from the inside out.

We pray Psalm 51: 10 with all our might:

"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me."

Ajax may be stronger than dirt;

the Good News is that nothing is stronger than the cleansing power of God.

Throughout the liturgical Season of Lent

let us explore together and then tap into the cleansing power of God

We start by examining ways to practice spring cleaning of our past, from the inside out.

In Christ, we can forgive what has happened in the past.

In Christ, we can overcome and learn from our past.

In Christ, we are not defined by our past.

Some folks are blessed with short memories.

They've learned the discipline to move on from painful past experiences.
Last week, baseball pitchers and catchers reported for spring training.
A common piece of advice for relief pitchers is to have a short memory.
Fact is, most of us have long memories.
No wonder forgiveness does not come easily.
We are so busy looking backward into our past
 we lose track, ignore, miss what God is saying to us today, in the present.
And often we nurse grudges, bitterness, resentments.
We nurse our past hurts and harms and hates,
 tending them, feeding them, giving them a special place in our hearts and minds,
 letting them keep us from sleep and slumber
 and distracting us from what is going on in the here and now.
Where there is no forgiveness, there is no life.

When you have a painful past that needs to be dealt with,
 the gift of forgiveness is given to yourself as much as to anyone else.

Anthony De Mello said, *"An unwillingness to forgive others
for the real or imaginary wrongs they have done
is a poison that affects our health
 – physical, emotional and spiritual – sometimes very deeply.
You commonly hear people say, 'I can forgive, but I cannot forget!'
or 'I want to forgive but cannot.'
What they really mean is they do not want to forgive."*

Forgiveness, which is stronger than dirt, cleanses the forgiver as well as the forgiven.
Jesus said, *"When you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven."*
We have that blessed gift, that blessed power, that blessed love to forgive and move on.
What baggage, burdens, or bindings do you need to place at the base of the Cross
 and then walk away, leaving them behind for Jesus?

The Good News is we are not defined by our past;
 our pasts are not indicative of our present and future with Christ.
Our pasts are for learning, for growing, for strengthening our backs and resolve.

Great scene in The Lion King when Simba is sulking, saying he can't learn from the past.
Rafiki the shaman whacks Simba on the head with a stick.
"Ouch, why did you do that?" asks Simba.
"What does it matter," says Rafiki, *"it is in the past."*
Then he swings the stick again; this time Simba ducks.
"See," said Rafiki, *"you can learn!"*

Not only can we learn from the past, God also learns from our mistakes.
God is constantly changing things up to get our attention:
 God changes tactics, methods, people, even conditions
 to help us grow and evolve.
The Spirit helps us learn from our past and other's past, from examples around us.

Sometimes we get overly concerned with our pasts,
with what we did or did not do,
with what someone else did or did not do to us.
Believe you me, from what I have read in the Bible,
God is not obsessed with our histories.

Many people think that we have to straighten out our lives first,
and then maybe God will consider us, cleanse us, call us, commission us to serve.
In fact, according to the teachings and examples in the Bible, it's the opposite.
Regardless of whatever road you have trod,
regardless of what you have done or said,
come to Jesus just as you are, a beloved Child of God,

One year ago, we lifted Palm branches in the context of sacred worship.
We welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem and our lives,
shouting, "*Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!*"

The branches have long since dried, faded, curled in on themselves.
Today we burned the palm branches, turning them to ash and dust.
Tonight the rite of ashes will be applied to our foreheads,
ashes in the shape of a cross,
a very visible cross worn not with pride but as a sign of penitence,
an outward sign of an inner confession and a new spirit.

The cross we bear is a humbling reminder that we are dust,
to dust we return,
that we are forgiven and cleansed of our confessed sins,
grateful for the forgiving grace of God in Christ.

Trust that
*the Trinity of the Creator, Son, and Holy Spirit
is stronger than dirt. Amen.*