

Pastor Troy E. Medlin
Ash Wednesday 2025
Grace, River Forest
3/5/2025

Pay Attention!

Years ago I was meeting some relatives for the first time. I was wearing braces on my legs that came up to my knees because of my mild cerebral palsy. We were sitting around getting to know each other and I felt this urge to quickly pull up my socks above my braces and hide them, so they would not see them. I didn't want their attention to be drawn there.

I have been nearly overcome during the imposition of ashes. Procession of old and young alike. We make eye contact for a second as I speak the truth that our breath will one day return to God. That sometimes takes my breath away.

Ash Wednesday gets our attention. Maybe you've been taken aback as you see that cross on a stranger. Or in the course of the day you forget it is on your forehead until you go to wash your face. Like a notification it demands your attention.

Our attention is stretched in so many directions experiencing what one Microsoft employee calls continuous partial attention. We are looking at the person in front of us but preoccupied. Busy with the tasks of the day, thinking of the latest breaking news, calculating, trying to resist the urge to glance at our phones. Devices that constantly clamor for our attention, attempting to avert our gaze away from bodies. Ours and others.

We, ever curved in on ourselves, want to direct our attention anywhere but on our brokenness. Failures. Need. Sin. Mortality. Even just the crooked edges of our bodies that change, struggle, wear out, need rest, require assistance, are made of dust. Other people, sure. Ours? We desire distractions. Whistle past the graveyard. Pull up those socks.

The liturgy is attempting to break through the chatter. Joel has trumpets. Second Corinthians, Now is the day of salvation. And Jesus, "where your treasure is there your heart will be also." Or, where your attention is, there your heart will follow. Like a liturgical alarm, "don't look away!"

Ash Wednesday can be a welcome interruption jolting us back to the truth. Cross of ash and cross of oil. As cross bearers we can focus on where the world turns away. Admit our weakness. Name our sin. Turn around. Ask for help. Show our wounds. Make mistakes. Keep those socks down. Go all the way to death and look straight at what we are most afraid of and say the true thing. You belong to Jesus Christ, for him, so for you- every death leads to resurrection. The cross that you bear today will bear you up through every dusty, ashy path and to ever end. Do not be afraid. You will not be consumed, but carried all the way.

He got my attention. I was stuck. The kind of stuck where you cannot hear anything but your own inner monologue. It was my brother this time who spoke in the gospel dialect of my heart. Driving in the car, he lovingly led me out of myself. As the miles clicked by I could start to see the outside world again. The truth will do that. Rearrange our attention. Set us free.

Where your attention is, there your heart will follow.

You may have heard about Saint Lawrence recently. During one of the persecutions, the Roman Empire demanded that the church turn over all of its treasures. Lawrence, a deacon, was the one put in charge of doing this. Immediately he sold all of the church's assets and gave it to the poor. He sold all of the church's property and divided it among those in need. On the third day-- he was brought before the emperor who demanded to see the treasures of the church. Lawrence gestured behind him. Standing there were the poor, sick, widows, orphans, naked, and the outcast. He said, these are the treasures of the church.

Marked as Christ's own we are free to treasure what moths and rust cannot destroy and thieves cannot steal. Give our priceless treasure our attention. The one born for you in ashy truth, bread, wine, water, word, relief, promise, the begging of needy ones, and in our neighbors. In the crooked places. Luther said, "All our works are to be directed toward the benefit of others. Given the abundance of our faith, our life and works become a surplus to be used freely in service of the neighbor."

Pay attention. See the cross? Earth creatures. Sinners forgiven and loved. You don't have to look away, for God will never turn from you.

May our attention be an act of resistance. While some flood the zone, may we honor all creatures of dust with a profound bow of deep attention, lingering there on the truth of it all.

In a world of buzzing notifications- profound, deep, attention.

It's okay. Keep your socks down.

