

“The Grace of Second Attempts”

*The Rev. S. Shane Nanney ~ February 18
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 and Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21*

I once knew a man—I can neither affirm or deny that this man was me—who decided to assemble a piece of IKEA furniture without reading the instructions. He was confident. He was efficient. He believed instructions were for other people.

Halfway through the project, there were leftover screws. At the end, the bookshelf leaned at a theological angle, as if it were questioning its own faith. The builder stepped back, admired his work, and said the most adult sentence I know: “Well... that’s probably fine.”

It was not fine.

Eventually, he had to take it apart and started it again—this time with humility and the instruction manual.

That, friends, is Ash Wednesday in a nutshell.

Ash Wednesday is not about being told how terrible we are. It is not God’s annual reminder that we should feel small and ashamed. Ash Wednesday is more like that honest moment when you look at the leaning bookshelf of your life and admit, “Something’s off. I should probably fix this.”

And the good news—the very good news—is that God is not standing there with crossed arms and a disappointed sigh. God is already kneeling on the floor with us, holding the instructions, saying, “It’s okay. Let’s try again.”

So, on this Ash Wednesday, what do the Ashes Really Say

When the ashes are placed on our foreheads, they don’t shout. They whisper.

They don’t accuse. They remind.

They don’t say, “You are awful.”

They say, “You are human.”

Ashes come from palms that once waved in celebration—palms that shouted Hosanna and meant it. And then, like all of us, those same hands hesitated, wandered, dropped things, and forgot. The ashes carry our whole story: our best intentions and our clumsiest follow-through.

That small smudge on the forehead is not a verdict; it’s a biography.

It says: You have lived. You have tried. You have loved. You have failed at some of it. And here you are—still becoming.

Ashes mark the place where illusion burns away. No pretending. No polishing the résumé for God. No spiritual cosplay. Just the truth of who we are right now.

And notice this: we don't put the ashes on ourselves in private. Someone else marks us. Someone else looks us in the eye and speaks words that hold both reality and hope.

"You are dust..."—grounded, limited, mortal.

"...and to dust you shall return."—but not meaningless, not disposable, not unloved.

Ash Wednesday isn't about shrinking ourselves. It's about standing still long enough to be honest.

Spiritual maturity begins when we stop trying to impress God and start trusting God with the truth.

When we were children, we thought growing up meant getting taller, staying up later, and eating dessert whenever we wanted. Turns out adulthood mostly involves apologizing, learning, and trying not to repeat the same mistake you swore you wouldn't make again.

Spiritual maturity works the same way.

Spiritual maturity is being able to say:

- "I messed up."
- "I'm sorry."
- "What can I learn from this?"
- "How do I do better next time?"

Ash Wednesday invites us into that kind of grown-up faith—not shame-filled, but honest; not gloomy, but grounded.

The ashes don't tell us we are condemned. They tell us we are teachable.

Somewhere along the way, many of us learned—quietly, incorrectly—that God's love is fragile. Like fine china. Beautiful, but one wrong move and it shatters.

So, we hide our cracks. We pretend. We say, "I'm fine," while leaning badly to one side.

But the God we meet in Scripture—and in real life—is not fragile.

God's love can handle our mistakes. God's love does not panic when we fail. God does not recoil in disappointment.

When we mess up, God does not say, "I knew it. I'm done with you."

God says, "Come here. Let's talk. Let's heal. Let's grow."

That is repentance—not groveling but turning. Turning toward wisdom. Turning toward wholeness. Turning toward love.

One of the clearest signs of spiritual maturity is the ability to make amends.

Not excuses.

Not explanations.

Amends.

"I'm sorry."

"I see how that hurt you."

"I want to do better."

That is holy work.

Forgiveness is what happens in heaven. Making amends is what happens on earth. Ash Wednesday lives firmly on earth. It deals with real people, real relationships, and real learning curves.

God is not interested in perfect people. God is interested in people who are willing to learn.

Now here's the part we often miss.

Ashes may look like waste—something to sweep up and throw away. But gardeners know better. Mixed into soil, ashes can help things grow. They change the ground. They release nutrients. They prepare the earth for what comes next.

God works the same way with our lives.

The ashes of broken relationships.

The ashes of words we wish we could take back.

The ashes of plans that burned instead of blossomed.

None of that is wasted in God's hands.

Ash Wednesday says: Bring it here. All of it.

Bring the regret that taught you empathy.

Bring the failure that finally slowed you down.

Bring the apology that cracked your pride just enough to let love in.

God doesn't erase our past; God redeems it. God mixes it back into the soil of our lives and says, "Let's grow something wiser from this."

You can't grow patience without waiting.

You can't grow compassion without pain.

You can't grow wisdom without a few honest ashes.

Lent is not a season of punishment. It's a season of cultivation. Turning the soil. Pulling a few weeds. Trusting that something green is still possible.

There's a story—maybe true, maybe just true enough—about a man who walked the same path home every evening. One night, after a particularly hard day, he tripped, fell, and scraped his hands and knees. He sat there for a while, embarrassed and aching.

And then he noticed something: the stars looked brighter from the ground.

He got up, brushed himself off, and walked home more carefully. From then on, whenever he stumbled, he remembered that falling had not ended the journey—it had changed how he walked.

Ash Wednesday is not the end of anything. It is a pause. A breath. A moment to notice where we've stumbled and how we might walk more gently, more wisely, more lovingly from here.

We wear ashes not because we are condemned, but because we are becoming.

We mess up.

God loves us.

We say we're sorry.

We learn.

We grow.

And that, my friends, is what it looks like to grow up in the grace of God.

Amen.