

To Ash Wednesday

By [Steve Pankey](#)

February 20, 2012

I'll post on the lessons for Lent 1 for the rest of this week, but today my thoughts are focused on what to preach for Ash Wednesday in a parish I don't know very well. Ash Wednesday is probably a top-five "liturgies that say more than any sermon ever could" service (with Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Vigil and Ordinations). It is a top-two "our words and actions don't line up" service (fighting with Palm Sunday for the title of most cognitive dissonance). It contains my [favorite prayer](#). It is an all around good service that should not be missed by anyone.

I'm seriously considering preaching on the [Matthew text](#) and comparing the faiths of Jeremy Lin and Tim Tebow, but every time I suggest that ol' #15 isn't the be all and end all of discipleship people start searching for pitchforks and torches. I've thought about telling my favorite Ash Wednesday story featuring a 6pm service and 7:30pm dinner reservations at an Indian restaurant. I've even considered following the advice of Alison Krauss who argues, "you say it best, when you say nothing at all." Despite all that, this morning I was drawn to the Collect for Ash Wednesday and realized that it might just be the perfect prayer:

Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent: 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; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

If you hang around the Church long enough, you'll find that most internal critics have one of two problems with it all. Either "there's too much grace" or "there's too much judgment." It can be rather exhausting hearing the same group of earnest disciples being chastised for being both too hard and too soft on issues of morality. What I love about this prayer is that it embraces that tension in a "critics be damned" sort of way.

It has too much grace – “you hate nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent... the God of all mercy...”

It has too much judgment – “worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness.”

And so does God.

Ash Wednesday is about new beginnings. It is about repentance (literally “changing direction”). It is about re-turning to God and away from the separation that offers forgiveness leads to sin and death. It is judgmental to say “we all fall short of the glory of God.” It is grace filled to say “God desires not the death of sinners.” It is both condemning and freeing and it is exactly what the Church ought to be saying.

I love Ash Wednesday. I’m glad that I’ll have three opportunities to worship – three opportunities to worthily lament my sins – three opportunities to bask in God’s grace. Grant us perfected remission and forgiveness, Oh Lord, over and over again.

*Originally posted at [Draughting Theology](#)*