

**Leftover Ashes**  
**Ash Wednesday**

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I have a friend who, on the occasion of her mother's passing, honored her wishes by cremating her and then scattering the ashes in several of her favorite places. For many of us that is a familiar scenario; not only burying or scattering ashes but doing so in places that meant something during life.

The backstory for my friend is that she had a terrible relationship with her mother, one that was fairly traumatizing. When she scattered those ashes she was closing a certain chapter that needed to be closed. The closing of that chapter may have held as much relief as sorrow.

One day my friend was cleaning the basement when she ran across a box. To her horror it contained more of her mother's ashes. How could they have not scattered all of them? Suddenly the closed case seemed open again. What to do? How to get those ashes out of the house?

Toss them in the trash? No, too disrespectful.  
Bury them in the flower garden in the back yard?  
No, too close for comfort.

At last a solution appeared – give them to a friend to enrich *his* garden. Fair enough and far enough.

Every so often we discover a leftover, something we thought was long gone, but whose remnant lives on. Like finding leftovers in the fridge from two weeks ago we were just certain we would have for lunch the next day but did not, we are not a little repulsed by the fact that we misplaced or forgot them and they are still there often in a deteriorating condition.

But the hardest things are not found in the fridge. The hardest things are often found in the basement of life, down in the reaches of memory and loss and pain. There they live like the remnant of ashes which have not yet been scattered. As we run across them, in wakefulness or sleep, they often torment us.

“I thought I was done with this. I can’t get away from it. This again! Why won’t these regrets, memories, or failures stay put where they belong?”

Those leftovers in the basement are the gifts that keep on giving; the unconscious has no garbage disposal and they can live there indefinitely. And until we do something with them – identify them, touch them, remove them – we remain haunted. As long as the unresolved aspects of the heart slumber in the basement they keep showing up for surprising cameo performances in our dreams, our present relationships, a lingering melancholy, the sense that something seems unfinished.

It is no accident that the ashes we smear on our faces tonight come from leftovers, from leftover palms from last Palm Sunday. A year ago we dramatized the end of Jesus’ final week, his entrance into the death trap of Jerusalem, the short-lived adoration of crowds that would turn dark soon enough. We watched his suffering for the sake of love.

And then we gathered up the leftover palms off the ground and stored them in the basement. During the year we kept running across them – “Oh, those palms!”

The day finally came when we gathered them up, burned them into ash and prepared to mark ourselves with them. We gather and say that the leftovers of Jesus’ life describe who we are and what we are passing through. The leftovers from Jesus’ walk will mark our walk.

What do we do with the leftover ashes? We could do lots of things. We could bury them somewhere. We could scatter them. But of all things Christians *wear* them. We wear them as a sign to ourselves and one another.

A long time ago I went to a mid-day Ash Wednesday service, received the mark of the ashes on my forehead and then went on about my day. I actually forgot I was marked. I went to the store, got a haircut, and walked down the sidewalk.

Every so often I noticed that people were looking at me strangely. But I had forgotten what was on my forehead. They gave me a peculiar look or averted their eyes but there was something strange about me. It was all a curiosity until I glanced in a mirror and noticed the black ash riding around on the carriage of my face. Then I realized what had happened, that I was being seen differently, strangely, for who I was as a Christian. Of course, today such a smudge seems out of place. But so is being a Christian, wearing the leftovers of Jesus, living as one acquainted with death and grief but at the same time living in resurrection.

There are those other religious traditions – and even Christian variations – that sport identifiable markings of the faith, through clothing or marks on the body. Year round they wear what they live and others know it. Though it is highly improbable that this will occur in our highly urbane congregation, it also couldn't hurt. Being an anonymous Christian is fine as far as it goes, and avoiding external show for the sake of some religious vanity is also important.

But much of what gets passed off today as Christian is little more than civil religion, the values of the culture that have been baptized and dressed up in Christian rhetorical clothing. It often bears little resemblance to Jesus himself, which is of course the point, and it is good to know the difference.

Wearing the ashes is a powerful reminder that we are, after all, Jesus people. Wearing the leftover ashes from the basement of time is the antidote to our denial and forgetfulness: This is the way life is, this is who we are, and we sometimes wear Jesus even without knowing it. Maybe people will look at us funny. Maybe that's not so bad.