

Ash Wednesday, at its core, is about honesty.

It's about being honest about who we are, who God is, and our mortal nature.

Ash Wednesday is a sacred time set apart to acknowledge that we mess up, that we are imperfect, that we are sinful.

It's not about focusing on the sins of others or the ways you've been wronged, there are other times for that.

But this confessional holiday is a time for us to bare our souls to God and say, I screw up.

I make mistakes.

I am too vain.

I am too selfish.

I am too judgmental.

I am too intolerant.

I am too fearful.

I am too prideful.

I am too....

It's also a time for us to acknowledge that despite all our flaws, God loves us anyways.

This is not a 'get out of jail free' card.

We aren't off the hook for self-improvement, it just means that we don't have to hide who we are, lest we be afraid of a judgmental God or a God whose love is conditional.

Because the truth is that hiding is dangerous.

Whenever we hide the fullness of who we are, it can eat away at our souls.

It can corrode our self-esteem.

It's destructive, not to mention exhausting.

Pretending you're somehow different, presumably better than you actually are, is a recipe for disaster.

You might fool people for a while, but you can't keep up the charade forever.

And, if you're always hiding or pretending, you never have the chance to improve.

The first step towards changing who we are, is naming what our flaws are, and you can't do that if you are hiding your true self from yourself and others.

So Ash Wednesday is a time for us to come out of hiding, to name our problems, and to rest in the assurance that God loves us anyways,

to the end that this reassurance of God's love is what gives us the strength to improve.

Ash Wednesday is a chance for us to basically walk through the 12-step program, addicts and non-addicts like.

If you've ever been in recovery, this will sound familiar.

If you haven't been in recovery, surely there are still things you need to recover from.

We all have those things.

And we can take a page out of the wisdom of the 12-step program.

You know how I said before that hiding and denial are destructive?

Well, the first step towards sobriety, before you do anything else, is admitting that you are powerless over the substance or behavior to which you are addicted.

Maybe you aren't an addict, but there might still be a flaw that you've been hiding which you need to admit to yourself.

This first step means rejecting self-deception and denial.

The second step is believing that a Power greater than ourselves, in our case, God, can restore us to sanity.

The third step is making a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God.

The fourth step is taking a moral inventory of ourselves.

This means doing some honest introspection so that we're able to name our strengths and weaknesses.

The fifth step is admitting to God, ourselves, and others, the exact nature of our wrongs, or the effects our behaviors have had on others.

And the sixth step is that we are entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

This goes with what I said before.

Admitting our wrongs to God and acknowledging God's love is one part, but accepting the challenge to improve, is the second part.

The story goes that the Psalm we heard this evening was written by David as a Psalm of repentance for lusting after Bathsheba, then sleeping with her, then having her husband killed because he got her pregnant.

David had a lot to repent for, but the first verse is very interesting.

It says, *“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.”*

The word translated “abundant mercy,” *raham*, is rooted in *reham*, or “womb.”

The speaker is calling on God’s “womb love,” the overflowing, eternally-connected love that a mother has for her child.

A love that can be counted on, rooted in, and rested in.

The speaker knows who God is, and pleads for mercy from within the fold of God’s never-ending compassion.

And so, this evening, let us be honest with ourselves and with God about our shortcomings, so that we might begin the process of improvement.

May the journey of Lent, which begins tonight, take the weight of hiding and pretending off of our shoulders.

So that when we get to Easter, we will be that much closer to being the people, that we know, and God knows, we are capable of being.

Amen.