

Ash Wednesday 2025
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
Matthew 6:1-6,16-21
The Rev. Dr. Kathy Kelly

The readings for Ash Wednesday initiate the Season of Lent with calls to confession and repentance, prayers for forgiveness, and admonitions to engage in fasting. They also caution people not to display their acts of contrition before others, but only before God.

That is what the scholars tell me.

I read a stream on social media last night in which Episcopalians were arguing about whether or not, when you leave this service, you should rub the ashes off of your face or leave them all day.

It seems the old school folks feel you should leave them while others find this smacking of the very thing Jesus just told us not to do - acting showy in the streets about our fasting or private faith expressions.

The old saying is that if you think you should take them off you shouldn't and if you think you should leave them on you should take them off. That's one way of letting the Spirit guide you. But the bottom line is finding that balance between being showy about your ashes and practicing a contrition about wearing them.

And apparently, it works. It at the least blesses people, at least the once and lifts their spirits and at best really does bring new souls to the Church.

A few years ago, I preached at an Ash Wednesday chapel service at a school. I asked the students to remember a time when they played a game where you said a word over and over again until it seemed to change meaning. Do you know that one?

We use a lot of words a lot of the time - like lunch or game or book - and we always mean the same thing. But sometimes we want to change how we understand those things.

So, some really smart people started changing the names of some stuff so that we can think about those things in a new way.

This is called cultural or value shifting and it happens naturally over time whether we like it or not. But there are a lot of groups who use language challenging or changing of language to instigate cultural shifting.

I asked the students to look at the word *cool*. About 75 years ago the word *cool* actually only meant not hot, as in the temperature of your lemonade is cool but not cold, cool but not warm. Then it started meaning *neat-o, awesome, or swell* sometime along the way. Then, about 20 years ago the word *wicked* started getting used to mean *cool*, as in *awesome*. Then, somehow the word *sick* became the new *cool*. I do not know when or how this happened.

The way we use words can change. And we can change the meanings of words.

We can also change ourselves. When we make changes like becoming better people, our attitudes change, our feelings changes, we get more happy and we get along with each other better. And we get closer with God.

Today is Ash Wednesday and the first day of the season of Lent. This is a time in the church when we get more serious about our study of the Bible and we work harder at being good Christians. We also try harder to understand what our bad behaviors are and we work to try to change them. We work at raising our awareness.

It's the same explanation for us. Lent is about changing ourselves and the way that we relate with God and each other.

Changing what we call things, changing nouns, is helpful in raising our awareness. We enter Lent with the intention of making our hearts contrite, examining our selves for flaws - like Spring cleaning around the house when we dust and throw out old trash. We are looking at ourselves very closely and carefully to see if we need to change something.

The larger Episcopal Church is talking about updating the prayer book. This goes on all the time. One of the changes recommended is that we should change the way we pray the Lord's Prayer. Specifically to change *Our Father who art in heaven* to *Our Parent who art in heaven*. Does that sound strange?

Well, we don't like the sound of that but let's look at both sides of it. Learning a new word or changing the words we use can be a good practice. If we can just *talk* about inclusive language and just *consider* praying to *Our Parent* instead of *Our Father*, it shakes things up a bit. This does not mean any of us is *required* to stop praying in the old way or in anyway that feeds your soul and your relationship with God. And the folks who are making these proposals to change the prayer book and the Lord's Prayer are very clear about this. They don't think anyone should throw out the old ways of praying.

On some level, I see their point. Talking about what words we use is a good practice. It is one way we can raise our awareness of habits we have and maybe that will help us see ourselves in a new light. And that's what Lent is all about.

Last year, on the Second Sunday of Lent, I taught you a new word. I'm going to bring it back up to see if you did your homework.

The word is [Paraprosdokian](#). (Spell word.) Paraprosdokian is a literary term used by scholars who work with rhetoric and literary criticism. It is also a comedic technique in literature. And it's one of my favorite words, especially in theological conversations, because it describes so well the practice Jesus has of turning a phrase or making a joke in order to get our attention.

A paraprosdokian is a sentence which consists of two parts. The first is a well known figure of speech and the second is an intriguing variation of the first which forces the listener to reinterpret it.

Groucho Marx made a career out of paraprosdokians.

“Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana.” (repeat)

“She got her good looks from her father; he’s a plastic surgeon.”

“One morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got in my pajamas I’ll never know.”

Another character who made good use of paraprosdokians was Winston Churchill. One of his was “There but for the grace of God—goes God.”

Comedians use these all the time. And the comedians are the ones keeping us sane these days.

To understand the words of Jesus as flipped upside down like that is a difficult thing for many of us. I guess it seems profane or we’re worried about misinterpretation or maybe we just don’t get the joke. But it is a good practice to consider the likelihood of humor when studying your bible.

Some of the best examples of Jesus’ use of funny ways of turning a phrase are at the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus takes universal experiences inherent in the human condition - poverty, grief, war, injustice, hunger, thirst, suffering, and persecution and calls them “blessings.”

Maybe it is time we rediscovered the “punch lines” in Jesus’ most memorable teachings.

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.” *sounds like a paraprosdokian.* And “whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may

be seen by others.” And “store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.”

These are not quite paraproductians. And they're not really funny. But Jesus had a similar way of turning things around.

In the Bible, Jesus says all sorts of things that make you re-think how we treat each other and how we might change. Jesus is telling us in this lesson that we need to be contrite - that means that we need to be humble and examine ourselves for all the ways we are not humble. And then repent - which means to turn around, to say we are sorry when we sin - and then we can celebrate the gift of Easter.

And yes, this takes a few weeks - about 6 weeks - and that is why we have Lent and that is why it lasts so long.

One of the most tempting things in all of this is to focus on others who seem to revel in the praying-on-the-street-corner sort of show-off-y way that Jesus is reprimanding. I mean, it would be easier to focus on folks who fit the description of “the hypocrites who love to stand and pray so that they may be seen by others.” Because, well, we're not like that. It would be easier to focus on others who sin in these ways but if we did we would miss the point and that is the invitation to enjoy a holy Lent by fasting and praying quietly “to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” And it would be tempting to focus on the reward and miss the point too.

But we won't do that. Not for our Lent this year. We're going to dig deep and work on understanding our own contrite hearts - or lack thereof. We will pray and we will fast in the ways that we each know we need to and we will look at the words we use and work on using our words more intentionally and carefully. Because that is what Lent is for and that is what Christians do.

Amen.