

Ash Wednesday Meditation
Gene McAfee
Forest Hill Church, Presbyterian
February 18, 2026

Ash Wednesday was one of those days, in the small town in southern Indiana where I grew up, when the divisions between the Catholics, who were the majority, and us Protestants, who were the minority, were made visible.

In that smudge of ash on the forehead, received at morning mass and worn throughout the day, Catholics reminded us that their way of living out their faith included rituals and gestures that we considered ostentatious and unnecessary, if not downright wrong.

We Baptists and Methodists and Pentecostals, on the other hand, looked at the smudged foreheads of our Catholic neighbors—and the relatively few Catholic friends we had—and we heard Jesus' words from Matthew's Gospel that I just read: *"Beware of practicing your piety before others to be seen by them."*

That's what many of us were thinking. What **they** were thinking—those who had been marked—we didn't know. And worse, we didn't much care.

I realize now that **they** included not only Catholics, but Lutherans as well, and probably most of the members of the UCC church that stood across from the grade school I attended. That UCC church had been an E&R church before the merger here in Cleveland in 1956 that created the UCC, and the liturgical tradition of the Evangelical and Reformed Church was much higher than we low Protestants realized—it might have looked, at times, like something we would have called "Catholic."

But I was Baptist in those days—American in name, Southern in outlook—and knew little about the UCC church in Tell City apart from the fact that they had a nice loud pipe organ in their sanctuary and that they were generous in allowing me to play it.

And if I knew little about the UCC in those days, I knew less about the Catholics and even less about Presbyterians because we didn't have any – there was no Presbyterian church in Tell City. And what I thought I knew about Catholics turned out, years later, to have been more prejudice than knowledge.

Ash Wednesday reminds me that I am still capable of resting comfortably on prejudice when I have not done the harder work of trying to know and understand and love those who are different from me.

The objects of that prejudice have shifted over the years. They may be more socially acceptable now, more carefully coded, more plausibly defended. But the underlying habits of the heart are familiar: fear of the other, fear of scarcity, fear of losing something I believe is mine. And those fears make it all too easy to avert my eyes from the ministry of reconciliation to which we have all been called as followers of Jesus Christ—and to which we were ordained in our baptism.

In recent days and months, that temptation has pressed in on us with particular force as we watch neighbors reduced to categories, families spoken of as problems to be managed, and human lives weighed primarily in terms of risk, cost, or threat. It is easier than we like to admit to let distance, paperwork, and political language dull our moral imagination—to forget that the ones we debate and detain are dust like us, beloved like us, mortal like us.

And that includes those behind the masks and the badges and the guns that appear when ICE shows up. It's as easy for us to dehumanize those who work for Immigration and Customs Enforcement as it is for others of us to dehumanize illegal immigrants. All of us are forgetting that before politics comes religion, specifically, the religion that says we are all the beloved children of our Creator, no matter what our politics and no matter how atrocious our behavior. Ash Wednesday calls that forgetfulness what it is: sin. Not merely personal failing, but the slow erosion of compassion that allows us to live untroubled by the suffering of others, on the one hand, or to demonize those using force in ways we consider inhumane and unchristian, on the other.

Ash Wednesday reminds me, too, that time is not on my side. I don't have forever to work out the kinks in my thinking or feeling or believing that hinder my following after Christ.

I don't have an infinite number of days to overcome my laziness, my phobias, my selfishness, my pride.

I don't have the luxury of *someday*. Someday I'll get my temper under control. Someday I'll patch things up with my brother-in-law. Someday I'll speak up when silence costs others their dignity. Someday I'll decide where I stand.

I don't have someday—and neither do you. We have this day, and only this day, to make amends, to begin again, to give the relationship or the calling or the neighbor another chance.

Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow is only a wish. Today is our opportunity.

We repeat on Ash Wednesday those sobering words from Genesis—“*You are dust, and to dust you shall return*”—to resist the temptation to deny the truth of our existence. To resist the fantasy that we will live forever. To resist the lie that matter doesn’t matter.

We smear ourselves with ashes not to practice our piety before others, but before God. We do it to remind ourselves to get on with the work of being the people God calls us to be—and the people we know we have not been—in Lent, in Advent, in life, and beyond life.

Time is not on our side. God is.

Our mortality is not a curse to be escaped; it is not merely a fact to be endured. It is an opportunity. Our mortal life—with all its richness and confusion, with all its joy and pain—is the very thing God Almighty assumed in the person of Jesus Christ. It is therefore not to be despised, discarded, deemed expendable, or even taken lightly. As Mary Oliver so beautifully and memorably put it, we have “one wild and precious life,” and every day presents us with the supreme opportunity we all get in this life: how shall I spend it?

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust—this is to be received with gratitude from the hand of God, wept over when we make a mess of it, and offered back, day after day, to the Giver, in humility and obedience and trust.

“In my beginning is my end,” T. S. Eliot wrote, and Ash Wednesday reminds us that where we started from is where we will wind up. “*The earth is the Lord’s,*” the Psalmist tells us, “*and all that is therein.*” That includes the dust. That includes us. That includes the stranger at the border, the family on the move, the neighbor whose future feels as fragile as ash.

Time is not on our side. God is.

Thanks be.