

“You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ’s own forever.” This is the pronouncement made while making a cross on the forehead of the newly baptized with holy oil. We are publicly affirmed as irrevocably belonging to God. This is how we begin our life in Christ.

But as we are alive in God, we are not God. And so we come here each year on Ash Wednesday to receive another cross of ash to humble ourselves before God ~ keeping in mind our mortality, our inclination to imperfectly reflect the image of God, and our desire to do better.

At the most memorable Ash Wednesday service I led, the crowd was small. It was a midday service, and the chalice bearer who was scheduled cancelled at the last minute. I had to scramble to find someone who was both trained and available to substitute. (Our church was situated in a blue-collar neighborhood, and everyone worked.) One of our vestry members, Tom, who worked from home said he could do it, but that he’d have to bring his pre-school aged daughter, Samantha, with him. No problem.

There were so few gathered that day, that we held the service in the chancel, or the front part of the church up near the altar. It was an intimate service, with many periods of silence – each as long as a 3 year old can be silent. Tom kept throwing me looks of apology when she would “whisper” to him, loud enough that even our hard-of-hearing attendees could hear. But it was all good – the sound of children, of course, is never unwelcome in the Episcopal Church. The service went smoothly, nothing remarkable happening until Samantha finished taking communion. She was at the end of the altar rail nearest her father’s seat, and so she was the last to receive. In her sweet little kid voice, she

loudly whispered, “Thank you, Papa!” and reached up to give him a hug. She may have been speaking specifically to her dad at that altar rail, but that’s the one prayer that sums it all up for each of us who love God: thank you, Papa ~ and ideally, we follow that up with acts of devotion (like service and prayer) ... which is as close as we can get to giving God a hug around the neck.

As followers of Christ and members of his Body, we continually need to renew our repentance and faith, and Lent is the season for being intentional about that. It requires that we take our own spiritual inventory and consider the things that hold us back from a life characterized by virtues like gratitude and generosity, compassion and self-control, joy and wonderment. And so we ask question like, what distracts us or prevents us from living according to our core values? What relationships need to be worked on and whom might we owe an apology? What might repentance look like in that relationship beyond the words “I’m sorry”? What might we need to do differently in other aspects of our life – our work/family balance, our financial life, our self-care? What resources or support systems do we need to put into place to help us or hold ourselves accountable?

For those who need a clearer roadmap to help explore those questions, I encourage you to pray over the baptismal covenant and consider how well you live out each vow. We all fall short, but with God’s help, we can do better.

1. Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers?
2. Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?
3. Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
4. Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

5. Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever. That is a done deal, no take-backs. It is only with God's help that we have any hope of living the life we say we intend to live.

Just like apologizing to our loved ones usually involves more than saying those two words, perhaps our gratitude to God, our "Thank you, Papa," might appropriately involve more than words. (We can do better than temporarily giving up sweets or choosing to cook at home rather than eat out for 40 days.) Let's dive deeper this Lenten season to make the necessary and lasting adjustments so that we may live – and live fully – a life in Christ, that would best summed up by the words "Thank you, Papa!"