

Homily for Ash Wednesday
March 6, 2019
By Deacon Nick Thompson

A truism is a claim that is so obvious or self-evident as to be hardly worth mentioning, except as a means of making a point. Statements like: “you get what you pay for;” “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush;” “a rolling stone gathers no moss” or the always popular “a closed mouth gathers no foot.” My father used to say, “If you don’t do it right the first time you are only hurting yourself because you will have to waste time doing it again.” Or his old favorite, “Don’t expect a reward for doing something you were supposed to be doing anyway.”

Why do so many people come to church on Ash Wednesday? My youngest daughter is a firm believer that appearances matter. She struggles as a single mother to raise two young boys. Despite a limited income her boys wear designer jeans and Jordan tennis shoes. Appearances however are indeed quite deceiving. You see she drives the extra mile to visit only the Goodwills in the rich neighborhoods. Appearances are like putting on a mask at Halloween. Do we put on ashes because it is who we are now; Or, do we put on ashes because it is who we want to become; Or, do we put on ashes because it is who we want to look like?

What is a hypocrite? A hypocrite is defined as a person who pretends to have virtues, moral or religious beliefs, principles, etc., that he or she does not actually possess, especially a person whose actions are different than their stated beliefs. So, we must ask ourselves, is my faith life like shopping in a secondhand store so I can keep up the appearance of being Christian? If I call myself a Christian but I'm not attending Mass on Sunday; I have no need or desire for reconciliation; I pray when God is punishing me; and I have no intention of changing myself in any way because after all I'm a good person; then why add hypocrisy to my list so that I can look Christian for a few hours one day a year. Ashes are a public statement of our faith in God, our belief in Christianity. They are like saying the Creed on our forehead. Please do not use this sign as a false advertisement.

For the most part we as Christians are not hypocrites. We are what I would refer to as strugglers. We do not want to be hypocrites and yet we find ourselves falling short of our beliefs time and time again. We cry out with Psalm 51, "Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness; in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense. Thoroughly wash me from my guilt and of my sin cleanse me." We recognize the message of Joel and desire to return to the Lord "with our whole heart, with fasting, and weeping, and mourning." Yet we struggle with letting go of earthly desires. We realize the urgency of internal change over external

change. We hear Joel's message, "Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord." Yet our earthly habits continue to rule us. We want the way, the truth and the life to become our habit throughout life not just a costume we wear during lent or to be seen. Yet we find ourselves slipping into being bad examples. We want to perform righteous deeds because we seek holiness and desire heaven. Yet we walk by the poor on the street corners. We want to give alms to those in need with no expectation of return. Yet we find ourselves being judgmental and selfish. We attempt to reduce our earthly needs, to fast and abstain as a means of reminding ourselves of who God is. Yet we are drawn to all the fish you can eat on Friday. What about my behavior, my hypocrisy, my constant struggles, my bearing false witness to myself? We after all Paul tells us are "ambassadors for Christ as if God were appealing through us." How can I be an ambassador for Christ? We want these ashes to give testimony that we are Catholic in our almsgiving, our fasting and our prayer 24 hours a day, seven days a week indeed every minute of our lives. Yet we struggle and never seem to succeed.

But Wait! If we could just for a moment remember that we are not God. We are human just an image and likeness of God, "To struggle" is our task, to depend on God's mercy is our task, to attempt to overcome our weakness is our task, to desire faith is our task, to run the good race is our task and we will not find victory in winning but simply in finishing

well. With God we will be rewarded for simply trying to do what we were supposed to. Jesus is our Savior who offers us the opportunity to become the righteousness of God in him. We cannot save ourselves. Jesus struggled, Jesus depended on his father in heaven, Jesus carried his cross, Jesus provides the finish. The music artist Aaliyah unwittingly defines our lives, our cross to bear in her song Try Again. As if speaking for Jesus she sings, "What would you do, to get to me? What would you say, to have your way? Would you give up, or try again if I hesitated to let you in? Now would you be yourself or play your role? Cause if at first you don't succeed, you can dust it off and try again. Dust yourself off and try again, try again (and again.)" Scripture tells us, "Behold now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation." If all of our struggles to become a saint have failed thus far now is the time to, "Dust yourself off and try again, try again and again" because sainthood is something we had better get right the first time and it is in trying that we will succeed.