

Ash Wednesday

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church February 18, 2026

For some reason, as I prepared for Ash Wednesday this year, I kept thinking about an Ash Wednesday service eight years ago at St. Andrew Lutheran Church in Ellsworth when the congregation was between pastors and I was helping out in the interim...

The congregation at St. Andrew is small, and as I have learned over the decades of being a pastor, not everyone in any given congregation chooses to attend Ash Wednesday services, because, as many people say, "it's so depressing" ... And so I knew we would be lucky if we had twenty people in attendance...

Which is why I was so surprised when, about ten minutes before the 7:00 service, pick-up trucks and cars began pouring into the parking lot, heightening my expectations for how many people we would have for Ash Wednesday service, until I realized that none of them were coming into the sanctuary, but instead were going into the fellowship hall, where unbeknownst to me until I asked, there was a Wednesday evening AA meeting...

After worship that evening I was feeling a bit cranky about AA's ability to draw folks to its meeting in contrast to the "meeting" offered by the Church... But after thinking about it for a while, I realized that the same thing was happening in the sanctuary as was happening in the fellowship hall... Because after all, what folks were doing in both places was making a fierce moral inventory of their lives, recognizing that their

lives often felt like a shamble of broken pieces, admitting their inability to put the broken pieces together again, and asking God (or a higher power) to take those broken pieces and make something of them that might have meaning or purpose or life or hope...

The truth is, on one level, Ash Wednesday is depressing in that it presents us with things most of us would rather avoid...

- Like texts from both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament that call people to repent of their sins, to turn away from wrong-doing and to turn toward God...
- Like a litany of confession in which we will participate in just a bit, and in so doing will name our failure to love others, our tendency to judge, our self-indulgent appetites, our indifference to injustice and cruelty, etc. etc...
- And if that wasn't enough, we will also be reminded of our mortality as ashes are traced upon our brows and words not spoken in polite company are spoken aloud, to each of us... These words... "Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return..."

So really, it's understandable that we might ask, "who in their right mind would **choose** to come to an Ash Wednesday service, when **these** are the things the Church **offers** those who come to worship?"

Perhaps only those who, like the folks who show up for AA meetings week in and week out, know that there are gifts that to be found in admitting our imperfections, our vulnerabilities, our outright failures, and our pretenses... Gifts to be had in taking these things out from their hiding places, naming them, and allowing them to dis-illusion

us until our illusions about ourselves are seen for the shams that they are...

And in order to speak of what those gifts might be, I am returning this evening to an image we have spoken of here at St. Brendan before...

Or more accurately an art form, an example of which we have before us this evening created by Frederica Marshall for the art exhibit that will be on display in the St. Brendan parish hall during Holy Week depicting the 14 Stations of the Cross.... Frederica allowing us to use her creation for this Ash Wednesday service...

Her art work before us this evening being a beautiful example of Kintsugi, which is the centuries-old Japanese art of repairing broken pottery using lacquer mixed with powdered gold, silver, or platinum, highlighting rather than hiding fractures. Rooted in the philosophy of [*wabi-sabi*](#) (embracing imperfection), it treats breakage as part of an object's history, creating a more beautiful, resilient, and unique piece, not in spite of the brokenness, but because of it...

When Frederica first told me about the art form known as Kintsugi some years ago, I was amazed by its capacity for using what seems ugly and worthless to create something beautiful...

But I've realized lately that I don't think I understood the truest meaning of Kintsugi (either the terror or the beauty of it, which, as a kintsugi artist will tell you, are two sides of the same coin) until the past eight months or so...

The thing is, I'm really good at "fixing" stuff, as in "putting broken pieces back together"... Not toasters or computers or V-8 engines or

anything like that... But give me a day when things are falling apart for a friend or a family member or a congregation or myself, and I will get my “super woman” cape on, organize the daylight out of everything and everyone, and patch together the broken pieces with my Super Woman Glue until everything is put back together... (kind of)

Or give me a day when I fear things aren’t “right” between me and a colleague, or a friend, or a kid or a parishioner, and I will patch things up with a beautifully written note, a Swedish coffee bread and the sweetest smile you ever did see...

I could go on and on about my prowess in the “fix-it” department... But you get the idea... Until quite recently Kintsugi art has seemed to me to be a beautiful art form, and full of metaphors for powerful sermons... But for the most part, I was for most of my life spared both its true terror and its true beauty because I was so adept at putting the pieces of broken things back together myself... (kind of)

But then, 8 months ago my husband Michael died suddenly and unexpectedly... As any of you who have lost someone without any preparation for such a loss may know, there are along with grief, so many “what-ifs” ... so many regrets...

- Regrets that your last words were not what you would have wanted them to be...
- Regrets for not having been more loving, more supportive, more “present” in the fullest sense of the word when you still had time to be all those things...
- Regrets for not taking your own words to heart, if like me, you are good with words and like to write little poems, like the one I

wrote some years ago entitled “Any Moment” ... A poem that goes like this....

Any moment the violin string could snap.

Any moment the cancer could return.

*Any moment the failure to extend my hand
could be the last time you reach for me.*

Every moment counts.

If, like me, you are a person for whom such an unexpected loss has occurred, you may know that as the pieces of your life that come with this loss begin to pile up around you, you also begin to recognize that your identity as “Super fixer” has been rather a sham all along...

And you suddenly realize that all you have the capacity to do is to take those broken pieces, to hold them before God (or your “Higher Power” or “the Spirit of Love” or however you name the essence of the presence that is larger than you), and to say, as the folks in AA say at every meeting, and as I have said a thousand times over the past months, “O God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change.”

This is the beginning of the gifts Ash Wednesday offers us... the truth about ourselves... the terrifying and beautiful disillusioning of our illusions about how well we can put the broken pieces of our lives

together and super-glue them in place forever... The truth about how the things we have done and the things we have left undone have sometimes caused brokenness for others; brokenness that we often can't "fix" in the ways we think "fixing" needs to be done...

The gift of this night is our woundedness, the relinquishment of all illusions that we can "fix" ourselves and others if we just try hard enough... **The gift of this night is our brokenness, our vulnerability, our emptiness...** Because when we are emptied of all pretense, there is room to receive the love that waits always to be received – the love that is as close to us as the air we breathe... the love whose other names are compassion (which means suffering with) and mercy (which in American Sign Language is translated as "a heart rolling out")...

The gift of this night is the realization that in the terrifying and beautiful alchemy of our lives broken open in the presence of God's love-crazed compassion and mercy, something else becomes possible...

Ask anyone who's been in AA for any length of time (particularly those who've become sponsors), and they will tell you that as God's compassion, mercy and love go to work on the broken pieces of our lives, something that was never before possible begins to become possible... something that feels like true healing... a repairing of the broken pieces (like in the process of kintsugi) that creates a more beautiful, resilient, and unique piece, not in spite of the brokenness, but because of it...

Precisely because it's a true and authentic kind of beauty...a beauty free of pretense and illusions... a fully human kind of beauty... a beauty forged in the fierce and tender love that dares enter the

darkness of our wounds... a beauty that when received and taken into the depths of our being, can then be shared with joy and humility and authenticity again and again and again... (giving us, in the language of AA... giving us the courage to change the things we can, not from a place of power and strength, but from a place of shared humanity and vulnerability and grace)...

No wonder one of the ancient Christian mystics was fond of saying that God is closer to sinners than to saints...

No wonder one of my pastor friends says all of the signs in front of our church buildings should say, "You don't have to be a sinner to come here, but it helps"...

No wonder one theologian has said we should call our worship services SA meetings.. as in "Sinners Anonymous"...

No wonder the gifts of Ash Wednesday this year have a whole new meaning for me as I bring with me the memory of tracing the ashen cross on Michael's forehead in this very place just last year... the memory of looking deep into his eyes and speaking those words, "Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return..." (Just as I also carry with me my regrets, and a whole new understanding of the pretenses that have formed my identity for so much of my life)...

No wonder, in the face of such difficult reminders and such truthful reality checks... no wonder this year I am particularly grateful that the ashen mark upon my brow (our brows) is a sign, an assurance, a promise, that in Jesus' willingness to come deep into our broken lives with arms wide open +, we come to see most clearly and profoundly the God who is Emmanuel God with us through it all..

The God who, with painstaking love... with the painstaking care of a kintsugi artist, joins the broken pieces together, tracing the sign of Love on our wounds +, embracing our imperfections, and creating thereby a more beautiful, resilient, and unique child of God, not in spite of the brokenness, but because of it...

This is the gift of this night, dear friends... So be not afraid... No matter what grief or fear or loss or regret the pieces of your life may hold... Bring them to the love that is deeper and wider than we could ever imagine... And know that in the alchemy of such Love you too will be healed, made beautiful and authentic and true...

Even in the ashes, even in the dust, the love of God is being traced upon our brows + speaking a promise that carries with it, even on this Ash Wednesday... a tiny hint ... a vague scent... an almost imperceptible sense of Easter...