



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
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## "Stirring the Ashes"

*Sermon preached at the noon service, February 10, 2016*  
*Ash Wednesday —Based on Joel 2:1-2,12-17 and Matthew 6:1-6,16-21*

When I was ten years old, I had the wonderful experience of spending an entire summer holiday on my grandparents' farm. Roaming through the large rambling two-story house one afternoon, I noticed a strange old container on the top of the mantle on a big hearth and fireplace. I asked my grandmother about it and she quipped, "That's the urn that holds Uncle Sam, your namesake." "What's an urn?" I asked. "It's a container that holds ashes," she said. And she hastened to add, "and don't ever take it down and look inside." "How did Uncle Sam become ashes?" I asked. "He was cremated," she responded tersely. "And, as I said, don't ever mess with it."

Gradually over the days, I wondered about it. I wanted to look inside. So I asked the nicer of the grands, my grandpa, if I might take a peek. When grandmother was away one afternoon, he got the urn down, set it on the floor of the formal living room, and lifted that lid for me to look inside. Then he took a glass stick and began to stir those ashes. I was amazed. It was my first encounter with what can happen to a person. While my grandpa stirred the ashes, he told me about Uncle Sam.

He started with the first half of his life. "Your great uncle was a rogue when he was a young man. He made poor decisions; he went the wrong way. He got crossways with a lot of folk; he ruined his reputation and the family name. He did a lot of damage to himself and others." He continued to stir the ashes. "But that's not the whole story," he added. "He turned the corner, made amends with others; he straightened himself out. He became a decent human being. With God's grace, he actually became a kind and generous person. He quietly did a whole lot of good for those who had been left out." I knew that was a nuanced reference to African Americans.

That's a real-life parable about today—Ash Wednesday. Some people don't want us to tell the story; they want to keep it under wraps. My grandmother wanted the Uncle Sam story to stay fixed in the ornate urn, never to be revealed. My grandfather, on the other hand, knew it was important to tell the truth, the whole truth about life, in its rogue-like state and its redeemed, upright state. Lent comes along every year and invites us to peer into the ashes of our own lives, stirring the truth, revealing that we also have had chapters of poor decisions, bumps in the road, damaging aspects. And we've also, by God's grace, turned some corners and discovered our God-likeness in kindness and generosity. In fact, I dare say, it could be said about most of us, "She or he quietly did a lot of good for those who are left out."

So, the ashes are stirred and smudged on our forehead in the sign of the cross to wake us up to the recognition of how things truly are. As we receive them and thus receive God's forgiving, merciful, renewing touch, it takes a strong measure of humility to allow Lenten events to transform us into Christ's likeness.

There's a classic country song that begins, "Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble, when you're perfect in every way." It IS hard to be humble! Even those of us who constantly run ourselves down are guilty of the pride that says, "I, more than God and my neighbors, know what I'm really worth."

How often our pride gets the best of us, without our ever even realizing it. We are prideful every time we judge another person, every time we think our way is the only way, every time we puff ourselves up and proclaim the gospel according to Bob or Elizabeth or Jose or Maria or LaVonta—or anyone else. When we humbly receive ashes, we're saying that we want to try to give all that up.

But how? The prophet Joel said it this way: "Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing." In other words, make your humility more than skin deep.

Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them." In other words, make your humility more than what journalists call a photo opportunity.

The martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer summed up our war against pride like this: "It is necessary to hide our own righteousness, even from ourselves."

Too often all we hide is our outward appearances of pride. When we dig deeper into any major psychosocial, geopolitical, or theological-ethical issue of our day, what we discover is that very often we participate at some level in what we disdain. In this discovery we often begin to hear our own voices, sometimes harsh and self-righteous, pridefully hurting and humiliating others.

This can be the gift of Lent: to hear our own voice as it really sounds. This can be a worthy Lenten resolution: to ask God to let us hear our own selves speak, if only for a season.

It is during these forty days that we can be humbled unto death though not by death. To be anointed with ashes is to burn away some of our pride and self-importance and to bring our honest selves to the journey of Christ to the cross, where we are finally not anointed with ashes of death, but with a vision of everlasting life.

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