

ASH WEDNESDAY 2006  
I John 1:1-10, Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

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### Begin by Being Forgiven

The annual Pancake Race was held in Olney, England, yesterday. As it was in Liberal, Kansas, keeping up a 56-year rivalry and tradition. Where did that all start? The pancake race in Olney, England, began in the year 1445, when on Shrove Tuesday, a woman was making pancakes in her kitchen, lost track of time and suddenly heard the village church bells ringing, calling the faithful to church for a service of confession, in preparation for Lent, which would begin the next day. Knowing how important it was to be in church, the woman raced out of her kitchen, still in her apron, and with skillet in hand, complete with pancake, headed to church. The idea of the pancake run caught on. But why pancakes? Shrove Tuesday, or Fat Tuesday, gets its name from the ritual of shriving, in which a person confesses their sins and receives absolution for them, pronounced by a priest in the Catholic or Orthodox tradition. More than a thousand years ago, a monk wrote of this practice, "In the week immediately before Lent, everyone shall go to his confessor and confess his deeds and the confessor shall so shrive him." But why pancakes? Shrove Tuesday is a day of celebration as well as penitence, because it is the last day before Lent.

If Lent is a time of abstinence, of giving things up, then the day before Ash Wednesday is a day to indulge yourself, to eat what you are not allowed to eat in strict Lenten observance. In a different day and age, there were many foods that observant Christians would not eat during Lent: meat, fats, eggs, milk and cream. But food was not to be wasted, so families would have a feast of shriving Tuesday, and eat up all the outlawed foods. The need to eat up the fats, and thus "Fat Tuesday", or in the French, "Mardi Gras". And pancakes? Lots of eggs, butter, and milk.

Another thought of Lent. Before I did anything else this morning when I arrived at church I took a cloth and dusted my office – the table and desk and windowsill and computer screen. Somehow it seemed appropriate to start this Lent with a clean slate – quite literally. And I got out things needed for this service, and checked to see that the dishes were cleaned up from last year, that we had enough oil and enough ashes. A certain contrast – cleaning up dust that just kind of accumulates, and flies around, and lands on anything in its way, and preparing ashes that will be applied intentionally with the words, "Remember that you are dust.."

And driving to church in the gray morning, on this first day of March when I wish that spring would be in the air, it was just chill, and everywhere are piles of dirty snow. Low temperatures and crisp air, beautiful falling flakes, and gently piling heaps of fluffy white stuff are quite lovely to walk in, and to see through the windows while you curl up with a snuggly throw in front of a warming fireplace, are satisfying and comforting. Dirty white stuff, frozen in ruts, sloppy streets, filthy cars are just plain ugly. This is a disconcerting time, when we are reminded on the outside what we might be like on the inside, frozen and stale and not very clean.

We begin this walk with Jesus, as we have titled our Lenten Wednesday reflections. Part of me wants to step right off, and just, well, just begin. "OK, Jesus, let's get going on this walk together. You walk with me through this life, ups and down, peaks and valleys, sorrows and joys, and I will walk along with you as I imagine your life

on earth must have been, along the shores of Galilee, in houses and public squares, while you go fishing and to weddings, as you heal and teach, and, at last, as you head for Jerusalem and the cross. Let's get going." And so each morning I pick up the Bible, and a book of prayers that I intend to follow, but I realize this walk will not be so easy. The walk itself is not that hard, it is more the getting ready. Pancakes and dusting are easy. Walking with Jesus means we need to change, change our direction, change our habits, change our practices.

I have a small book of daily prayers, *A Diary of Private Prayer*, one for each morning and one for each evening of the month. If I used it every day for an entire year, I would go through all the prayers twelve times. The prayers were written in 1936, and prayed, by John Baillie, theologian and Church of Scotland minister, professor at the Divinity at the University of Edinburgh and teacher and lecturer in the United States and Canada. I have had this little book for forty-five years, probably the first such devotional and spiritual guide in my library. Although Baillie's language is more flowery and formal, befitting his era and his education, his prayers are evocative, speaking to my soul of a daily walk with Jesus. And in all the years I have had this book, I don't think I have once read it through, every day for one month. Oh, I have read every page and prayed every prayer, but in spite of my best intentions to have a consistent and purposeful time of meditation and reflection each day, I have not yet done it. Perhaps this will be the Lent. What does it take? And what gets in the way?

I start off well enough, with morning prayers filled with thanks. Listen to phrases from Baillie, "O God my Creator and Redeemer, I may not go forth today except Thou dost accompany me with Thy blessing.....let not the vigor and freshness of the morning deceive me into a false reliance upon my own strength. All these good gifts have come to me from Thee...O blessed Jesus, who didst use Thine own most precious life for the redemption of Thy human brethren...give me grace today to follow the road Thou didst first tread." But it is in Baillie's evening prayers that the key is found, the key to that walk with Jesus, prayers that at first reading might seem harsh and depressing, prayers that in the saying force you to look at yourself, and own up to the day. I don't like to think of failure, self-deception, bad choices, complacency, hardness of heart, hesitancy to believe, lost opportunity, hasty words. I don't easily bend my knee or my will or my spirit in a posture of asking forgiveness, with Baillie's words... "yet Thou art still willing that I should come to thee in lowliness of heart, as now I do, beseeching thee to drown my transgressions in the sea of thine own infinite love." We begin with being forgiven. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."

I have in my office a small bookcase, a battered and beaten piece of painted furniture that may seem to have no place in this newly refinished space, with fresh paint and new carpet. But I like it, as I like other pieces of antique and used furniture. This bookcase shows that it has been well used, well worn. The years have taken their toll and scratches and nicks show. I suppose that some would think it should be sanded and refinished, that a shiny coat of varnish or wax would restore it to its like-new state, or at least freshened with a new coat of paint. But I think I will keep it as it is. Today it is free of dust. And the walk with Jesus, the sacred journey of Lent, has begun. Amen.