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**Genesis 3:17–19, ESV**

*<sup>17</sup> And to Adam he said,  
“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife  
and have eaten of the tree  
of which I commanded you,  
‘You shall not eat of it,’  
cursed is the ground because of you;  
in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;  
<sup>18</sup> thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;  
and you shall eat the plants of the field.  
<sup>19</sup> By the sweat of your face  
you shall eat bread,  
till you return to the ground,  
for out of it you were taken;  
for you are dust,  
and to dust you shall return.”*

**Galatians 5:13–14, ESV**

*<sup>13</sup> For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. <sup>14</sup> For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

**Ashes.**

Our first quote is the traditional Ash Wednesday Bible passage. It’s God laying down the law on Adam after he has broken the one restriction that God placed on Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and that was to NOT eat the fruit from the

tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Symbolically, Adam has decided to try to understand life, to understand good and evil, to understand how we should live on this planet, all by himself. By eating that fruit, Adam has declared that he does not need God's guidance; he can move through life on his own. So, God tells Adam that from now on, Adam is going to have to suffer in life. Adam will have to work hard for the food he eats. And when Adam dies, he will return to the dust from which he came.

On Ash Wednesday, we put ashes on our foreheads as a symbol of that cycle of life. God created us from nothing and to nothing we will return. Those ashes represent our mortality, our dependence on God every day of our lives, and our understanding that we will have pain along with joy in life.

Those ashes also represent repentance, our acknowledgement that, unlike the arrogant Adam, we accept, and in fact, we embrace our dependence on God. Only God can show us how to find the path to God.

But ashes represent something else. Consider our second quote, one that I would prefer to focus on this Ash Wednesday. *Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.* That's what ashes represent, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who lived as a poor man, who lived a short life on this planet, who over and over showed his love for those who had very

little in life, and who ultimately died and returned to the earth for us. Jesus rose from that death, came out of his earthy tomb. We live in emulation of that life, that life of sacrifice. Ashes represent penance and sacrifice, a willingness to risk one's earthly life, to possibly return to dust, for the sake of other humans, just as Christ did. Ash Wednesday begins the forty-day period of Lent that ends on Easter Sunday, when we celebrate Jesus Christ overcoming the gruesome death that he earned by serving us.

One of the things I do at Boulder Community Hospital is go to the emergency room in the middle of the night when there is a family member dealing with the sudden death, serious injury, or dangerous sickness of a loved one. Doing this job, I have come to know a number of members of law enforcement. Once I was with a woman whose younger adult son had been at a remote location, at some storage lockers managed by a friend, where he was able to find enough open space to work on his pickup truck. He had it jacked up, but not put it properly on blocks. He was under the truck when he accidentally kicked the jack and was crushed by the truck. His injuries were severe. His heart had stopped for some period of time, and before firefighters were able to restart his heart, he suffered brain damage. The likelihood of him not fully recovering was being explained to his mother while I was supporting her, both emotionally and

physically – she couldn't even stand on her own. There was a deputy sheriff who had been the first person on the scene after someone heard the injured man calling for help and dialed 911. When the man's mother said that she was going to have to go to the storage lockers and find her son's car because it had his wallet and notebook computer in it, the deputy volunteered to do it for her – even though he was now off duty. He did it, too, and drove the car to the woman's house.

Another time, an officer brought a runaway child to the ER to be checked out, and by the time they got to the hospital, the officer had bonded so closely with the boy that the boy begged the officer to stay with him for a while. We frequently get inmates from the jail at the hospital. They always come with an officer assigned to watch them around the clock, and invariably, the officers have brotherly or fatherly relationships with these prisoners, giving them advice on how to develop stable paths in life, how to stay off drugs and get jobs. Frequently, it's the officer who has asked for a chaplain to talk to the prisoner, so that they grow to understand that there really are people out there who care about them, despite the fact they have gotten into trouble. Police officers are routinely the first people on the scene at horrific car accidents, overdoses, suicide attempts, domestic violence incidents, medical emergencies, and industrial

accidents. Cops are the ones who bring people into the hospital to get the help they need and then stay there to make sure that the person's family gets to the hospital. Police officers, deputies, state troopers, and corrections officers not only step into dangerous situations routinely in order to serve, they exhibit genuinely Christ-like behavior of caring for those in society who get the least respect and have the least assets in life.

Police officers are also routinely demeaned in our society. This is another Christ-like attribute: they are spoken of with derision, they are treated with suspicion and disrespect, and they are cast aside as unwanted and unloved.

There is a relationship, of course, between the two views of Ash Wednesday, the one that has to do with the cycle of life and of penance, and the one that has to do with living a life of service. It is grounded people, those who are confident in their faith and who appreciate the need for humility and who are willing to ask for forgiveness when they have done wrong, who are also the most likely to live in joy by serving others.

So, on this Ash Wednesday, I would like to offer up thanks to law enforcement, those who live by the words written by Paul in his letter to the Galatians. It is an eloquent letter that talks about grace and how we are God's hands and mouth on this planet. Law enforcement officers are rooted, hard-

working people who know the blessing of living for things of God's world, not the things of this world. And we live for the things of God's world when we live for others and not for ourselves. Most law enforcement people know that we must use our *freedom to - through love - serve one another.* <sup>14</sup> *For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

Now, if you have ashes that you took home from the service on Sunday, apply them now to your forehead, or trade with someone else. Make a cross and remember the beauty of living for God and God's people. Amen.