

Ash Wednesday – three days ago – has been a hallmark in certain Christian church traditions for centuries, is a relatively new addition for some, and is ignored by others. The emphases vary from (1) a spotlight on human “fallenness” from a concept of perfection at Creation to (2) a broader consideration of human mortality and turning from God’s eternal, gracious love embodied in Jesus Christ.

The ashes imposed (smudged) on a person’s forehead or back of one hand are the product of burned and crushed-to-a-powder palm leaves from the previous year’s Palm Sunday, the annual Christian celebration of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem two thousand years ago. According to Scripture, as Jesus entered riding on a donkey, hopeful crowds of his disciples waved palm branches in celebration.

Of course, that week in Jesus’ life “went very bad.” Hailed as an arriving Messiah or Savior on a Sunday, Jesus was arrested on Thursday and crucified as a heretic and rabble-rouser on Friday. The use of palm leaves on Ash Wednesday symbolizes how we humans today – like Jesus’ disciples long ago – “don’t get it right” when habitually thinking that life from God is or can be victoriously redeemed without suffering.

So people repent of our human “wrong headedness.” Without repentance, we “live the lie” of complicity with – and satisfaction in – brokenness from the salvation (wholeness) which God seeks and promotes in Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and resurrection. This brokenness separating us from God’s caring love is “sin.”

During worship on Ash Wednesday, a worship leader touches his/her thumb to olive oil before touching the palm ashes. He or she then makes a smudge in the shape of a cross on the forehead or the back of the hand of a worshiper who has come forward desiring imposition of the ashes and oil mix. The words spoken at the time of the imposition vary from the traditional,

“Remember that you are dust, formed of the earth, and to dust shall you return,” to a “more upbeat” characterization which adds, “Yet in Jesus Christ you are made alive.”

At 7:45 this past Wednesday evening, following worship, when picking up the small bowls containing the ashes, I could not find the aluminum foil wrap which contained the excess ashes not placed in the bowls for use in this year’s worship service.

I wondered if I left it in the kitchen where, prior to worship, I spooned ashes from the aluminum wrap into the two bowls. Not seeing it on the counter tops, I thought, “What if a person in the soup-supper clean-up-crew saw crinkly aluminum foil, thought it was trash, and threw it away?” I peered into the trash can (which had not yet been emptied), moved a paper towel on top of the heap, and spotted what I thought was the missing packet. Reaching, grasping, and lifting it, I unfolded the top. There, to my joy, was at least another year’s supply of palm dust remains! I walked that packet down the hall and placed it in my office desk drawer, where it annually resides until called upon for the next Ash Wednesday worship service.

I can lose a year’s supply of palm ashes. How much more unfortunate, though, to lose perspective on God’s judgment that we humans “live the lie” of self-sufficiency, in denial of our human brokenness. That’s why we need genuine repentance: for remembering and authentically sharing the newness of life God offers through caring, gracious love embodied in Jesus, whether we actually utilize the symbolism of palm ashes, or not.