

Ashes & Dust

It is Ash Wednesday during my discernment for ordination at Holy Comforter.

When I arrive, David and Gabe are playing chess. Gabe tells me that he awoke that morning to find his roommate dead.

Later I meet Shelby, a heavy-set young man with a twisted face. He is eager to talk. He was released from the hospital earlier in the week after a two-week stay arising from attempted suicide. He wants the pain to stop.

While we talk, Lida Mary, also new to me, interrupts, saying that the Mafia is trying to kill her and her children and asking for prayer. I say a short prayer asking God to protect them. She asks whether it will work.

Later I sit alone in the church. A tall, thin woman sits at the other end of the pew. She sways back and forth rubbing her thighs vigorously, sighing deeply.

During the imposition of ashes, Rita is reluctant to go to the altar rail. Barbara, the usher, encourages her, "Come up with me."

All but Father Mark have received the ashes; he nods to John and kneels at the rail. John hurries up and imposes the ashes, perfectly incanting: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

After a couple of weeks of dullness, I am once more alert to what is happening around me. I am alert, but powerless, powerless to assuage Shelby's pain or Gabe's grief or to relieve Lida Mary's fear. But I see working of the Spirit in the community. My own powerlessness is quite insignificant.

As I remember that evening, I weep, and I smile, vividly and simultaneously reminded of our mortality and our graced life in the body of Christ.

*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens,
and I will give you rest.*

*Take my yoke upon you and learn from me;
for I am gentle and humble in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls.*

*For my yoke is easy,
and my burden is light.*

Mike Tanner