

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: February 14, 2018  
Sermon Title: Ash Wednesday: The Power of Ritual  
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I had no idea about Ash Wednesday. I mean Ash Wednesday with ashes, until I came to this Church.

I grew up with Lent, of course. I knew Ash Wednesday was the start of Lent. And I knew that all my Catholic friends had a black smudge on their foreheads the first day of Lent. But I had never given out ashes. I had never received ashes. Then I moved here, where Ash Wednesday, with real ashes, was already happening. Alida tried to bring me up to speed on its history, meaning, even how to put the ashes on the forehead without spilling them down your nose onto your dress, shirt, or tie, which I did that first year.

The truth is, ashes are an ancient ritual, an idea, and an action that's been around a long time. Historically, ashes are a symbol of mourning. You've heard the expression "sackcloth and ashes." It's what people did when a loved one died: they would put on sackcloth, sort of like burlap, and they would cover themselves with ashes or just dirt from the ground. It's what people did whenever they were in sorrow.

And the first five words of what I just said are what make a ritual: "It's what people did whenever." Whenever you do the same thing over and over again connected to the same purpose, that's a ritual, or a rite. And some of those rituals, the ones connected to religion, are so important that we call them "sacred rituals," or "sacraments."

It so happens that our Confirmation class this week was about "rituals." We brought all the eighth-graders into the sanctuary, and we started off with brownies. Every Monday we have homemade brownies or cookies. Yes, it's a ritual. You see, if every Monday night all the eighth-graders come to Church and eat brownies, that's a ritual, a rite. But we wanted to take them deeper, beyond brownies, beyond rituals into the sacred: the sacraments.

The famous ones come from the Catholic Church: Baptism, Holy Communion, Confirmation, Penance, Last Rites, Ordination, and Marriage. Each of those events is always special, and what you do at each of those events is pretty

much the same. So, if you do the same thing over and over again, the same way with the same purpose, well, that is a ritual, a sacred ritual, a repetitive action made holy by its purpose.

Like, for instance, Baptism. So, on Monday all those eighth-graders and I gathered around the Baptismal font over there. We read about Jesus getting baptized in the River Jordan. I showed how that was done. Then we talked about baptizing babies in our Church (including most of them); and then I did it to them. I dipped my fingers into the water, I made the sign of the cross on their foreheads, just the way it's been done for 2,000 years.

A happy family brings a little baby into Church to give thanks to God and start their faith journey by having the pastor take the baby into their arms and placing water on their heads in Jesus's name. A sacred ritual.

And then we had Holy Communion. We read about Jesus's Last Supper, we read from the Bible what he said to do, take some bread to break, take some blood-red drink to drink, and, "Do it," Jesus said, "as often" . . . "Do it . . . as often . . . as you do it . . . in remembrance of me." So, if you do it, do the same thing, often, regularly, remembering, then you have a sacred ritual. Something done the same way over and over again for the same holy purpose.

Then, I showed them our "prayer candle stand." It's a new idea in the old Congregational Church. But the idea is as old as the hills, literally. Since the dawn of creation, humans have been trying to figure out how to be in touch with God. And one of the most ancient ways, almost universal, is a "sacred fire": fire, smoke, burning, incense. And among its properties is it's all *upward*. The flames go upward, the smoke swirls upward, and in our human minds we think of God as "up there." Even in the Bible our prayers are described as sweet-smelling smoke rising up to God.

So we had our eighth-graders line up, and one by one they lit a candle, remembering before God, one person, one event, one concern that they'd like God to give attention to. Thirty-seven eighth-graders doing what people have done since the dawn of time, creating flame and smoke, linking it to some personal concern and sending that thought up to heaven. A sacred ritual.

While flame and smoke as symbols of prayer may be as old as the hills, the journey to bring this ritual into our Church began on 9/11. Except for the oldest members of our Church who might remember D-Day or Pearl Harbor, for most of us, 9/11 was the most horrific, unimaginable, terrifying event of our lives. And as your pastors, our first thoughts were "What to do? How to help?" We knew people would pour into the Church at all hours of the day and night for days, even weeks afterward.

Was there anything we could say or do that might heal our broken hearts and spirits? Yes, we knew we would do the obvious. Scripture. Hymns. Prayers. Sermons. Words. Lots of words, good words, important words.

I love words. I believe in words. I've made a whole career out of words. But could there be anything else? Something. Something . . . tangible? Something . . . visual?

For 9/11, we did three tangible visual things. We had 300 flowers covering the altar, one for every 10 people killed on 9/11. And when people left the Church, we created a visual effect: "Twin Towers," a combination of smoke and light, all upward toward heaven. And then for days we had hundreds of small smooth stones over by the baptistery. People could drop by any time, any day, pick up a stone, hold it tenderly in their hand, writing a name on it if they wanted to, place it in the baptismal water, as if washing away all our tears. A year later the stones were back there as we honored the first soldiers killed in the wars in Afghanistan and then later in Iraq.

And year after year, with more soldier deaths, with more terrorist murders, with more gun violence, with Newtown and Las Vegas and Paris and London and more and more and time and time again, we came together to name the names, to honor and remember.

Such occasions were so numerous, so often, that we made the heart-breaking decision that we needed to be prepared, to be ready ahead of time. And so, just before Thanksgiving, we purchased our prayer candle stand. We used it first at our Thanksgiving Day service, inviting people to come forward and light a candle for someone they miss and love and remember around the Thanksgiving table. Every day since, people come into this Church, sit in a pew for a moment or more, come to the front, light a candle, and say a prayer, their love swirling upward toward heaven. A sacred ritual, an ancient ritual, is reborn in this old Church.

Which brings us back to Ash Wednesday, the Wednesday of ashes. We can make of it what we will. It can be the start of Lent, nothing wrong with that. It's true. It can be a time of sacrifice. "The mortification of the flesh," we used to call it, bringing our desires under control. In popular usage, that could be giving up sweets or movies or, as I did 20 years ago, smoking. There's something we don't want to do, shouldn't do, or isn't right, and we can use Lent as a self-imposed season of discipline. Or, it can be a time of reflection.

The classic message of Ash Wednesday is "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust . . . from Earth you came, to Earth you shall return." It's always said at every funeral. It's a reminder that funerals await us—yours, mine, everyone's—one

day, sooner or later. We are human. We are mortal. Life ends. And the wise among us are ready, always ready. Ash Wednesday is just another way to be ready. To recognize our limits. To "have our house in order." To know, honestly know, down deep, that life ends.

All by itself, that's a pretty gloomy, pessimistic outlook. But this ritual is a sacred ritual, a ritual made holy by our faith. Our religion is about death. Ash Wednesday isn't the be-all and end-all of Lent. It's only the first day. The last day of Lent is Easter, a celebration of life beyond compare, a promise of all the things this Church stands for: God's love, God's world, God's ways, God's life, the "life abundant" that Jesus talked about, that begins in this world and continues into the next.

My dog died this week. Mickey, a Siberian Husky. We had him for four years before my allergies and my knees made it impossible to care for him. And so a wonderful Church family, the Edminsters, took Mickey into their lives, and Mickey grew up right along the Edminster kids, Owen and Clare, a perfect fit. When Clare was told that he had died, she told her mom, "That's O.K., he'll be waiting for us all in heaven."

That's an Ash Wednesday message, believe it or not. We don't deny death. But we don't deny what's waiting after it either. I'm not trying to lump together dogs and grandparents or cats with best friends. But love is love, and sorrow is sorrow, and death is death, and heaven is heaven.

The ashes of Ash Wednesday help us to touch it all.

Let's join together and sing Hymn No. 180, "Lord, Who Throughout These Forty Days."

*Lord, who throughout these forty days  
for us did fast and pray,  
teach us with you to mourn our sins  
and close by you to stay.*

*As you with Satan did contend,  
and did the victory win,  
O give us strength in you to fight,  
in you to conquer sin.*

*As you did hunger and did thirst,  
so teach us, gracious Lord,  
to die to self, and so to live  
by your most holy Word.*

*And through these days of penitence,  
and through your Passiontide,  
forevermore, in life and death,  
O Lord, with us abide.*

*Abide with us, that through this life  
of doubts and hope and pain,  
an Easter of unending joy  
we may at last attain!*