

Almost nothing reminds us of our mortality better than being marked with ashes and hearing the words: “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.” All too often, death is talked of in hushed tones and euphemism, but today we say it out loud. It’s really counter-cultural, to come to this place and embrace our limitations and vulnerability in way we seldom see.

In fact, there is an active push to keep things positive. “Good vibes only!” That’s a slogan I see a lot: “good vibes only!” Have you seen the signs at Target? If you’re on any kind of social media, I’m sure you’ve seen that or a similar hash tag.

This phrase is usually paired with a pair of sunglasses, maybe a picture of a beach and big, wide smiles. “Good vibes only!” someone proclaims, stating that they refuse to be bogged down by anything else. Keep your worries, your sadness, your grief, your pain, your discomfort, your frustrations or anything else that isn’t shiny and happy far away.

On the surface, this doesn’t seem so terribly bad. It’s positivity! It’s optimism! But the reality is that this mentality can get ingrained into us deeper than we realize. I’ve heard stories of people who have stopped being friends with someone because every time they wanted to talk about real issues, their friend responded with some variation of “good vibes only!” and refused to engage their concern.

The fact is our lives are not only made up of good vibes moments. It’s not all sunshine and warm beaches. It’s not all joy and smiles. That’s not what it means to be human and Ash Wednesday reminds us of this.

Our readings tonight begin with the prophet Joel calling the people to lament and repentance. “Rend your hearts and not your clothing,” he advises. Lament for the ancient Israelites involved tearing their clothing. Joel tells the people to return to the LORD, not just with outward displays of piety, but with deeper feeling, laying themselves bare before God. Rending cloth isn’t important if your *heart* is not in it.

Joel reminds us of our own failings, the ways that we fall short. And Paul reminds us in Second Corinthians about all the ways the world as a *whole* falls short, all the ways in which our lives are troubled and interrupted and damaged by hardships and calamities...in other words, the ways sin hurts us.

Joel and Paul encourage us to not hide behind a “good vibes” façade, but admit and embrace the ways in which our souls are hurting and bare them before God who is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” (Joel 2:13b)

This also connects to the Gospel reading, where Jesus implores us to not engage in acts of spiritual piety for show, but to do them in secret to be sure they are for God alone.

The main theme here, I think, is vulnerability. The problem with a “good vibes only” or “think happy thoughts” or “stay positive” attitude is that when it is taken too far, it eliminates any chance of allowing ourselves to open up, to each other or maybe even to God. We keep our fears and our insecurities and our pain hidden in favor of pasting on a smile and telling people that we’re okay.

This isn’t all the time. And it isn’t even necessarily with everyone. But more often than we should, we display for the world an attitude that nothing is wrong and everything is fine. We want to be seen as strong.

As a pastor, I spend a lot of time with people when they are facing tough times: bad diagnoses, deaths, losing jobs, marital problems, financial woes, and more. Sometimes people are really engaging with their feelings. But more often than you might think, when I ask someone how they are feeling they tell me that they shouldn’t feel too bad because someone else has it worse.

I’ve been said that myself! When Owen was first diagnosed with leukemia almost a year ago, when people would express concern, we were quick to try and dispel worry: “His cancer has a high cure rate!” “He’s doing great with treatment!” “Other families and other kids have a harder time than we do!”

Of course, that’s often true. Other people might have it worse than you. But that doesn’t mean that you don’t get to grieve or lament or be angry or scared when something is happening in your life. In our case, we had to allow ourselves to say, “It could be worse, but it doesn’t mean it’s not still really hard.” This is not the suffering Olympics. We aren’t in competition with each other over the tough stuff in our lives. You don’t need to prove to me or anyone else that you’re “allowed” to struggle because of a list of reasons it’s justifiable.

We are human. Our lives are full of ups and downs, good times and hard times, new beginnings and lots of endings. I’m not saying that every single person needs to wear their heart on their sleeve or greet everyone they see with a list of what’s bothering them at that particular moment...but I think it’s good and healthy for us to admit that everything is not always sunny smiles and sandy beaches. It’s good for us to remember that we are dust and to dust we will inevitably return.

Let Ash Wednesday remind us that our vulnerability is what makes us human. Be brave and be courageous enough to open up with the people who you trust and who care deeply about you.

At the very least, think about being vulnerable with *yourself*. Be vulnerable with God, who sees in secret and hold us in love.

Amen.