

A colleague told me a great story about Ash Wednesday. He said that he had just made the sign of the cross with ashes on the forehead of a toddler. The toddler was overheard to say to his mother as they left the altar rail, “Mommy? What’s butt dust?” As you can imagine, my colleague barely managed to keep his composure.

Today is the metaphorical centerpiece between our baptism and our funeral. Today we remember that each life that is born upon this earth will also be borne from this earth. No matter if the time in between the two extremes is measured in decades, years, or even moments, the time is too short.

One of my friends ends his e-mail signature with this thought-provoking sentence: “You enter life weak and vulnerable, you exit life weak and vulnerable. What you do between the two is up to you.”

So I have these two euphemisms in my head for Ash Wednesday. Thanks God.

I’ve also been reading Brene Brown’s book *Daring Greatly*. I like her writing and what she has to say. And, I think that her research into vulnerability helped me see an unlikely link between these euphemisms.

Let's look at that e-mail sentence again. "You enter life weak and vulnerable, you exit life weak and vulnerable. What you do between the two is up to you."

There's an assumption there – that in the middle you should do something that makes you strong and invulnerable. However, strength and invulnerability often work to our detriment. We pretend we are strong when we are not. While it sometimes helps us 'fake it 'til you make it' it also tends to wear us down. We act invulnerable to mask our own doubts about ourselves. That also tends to wear us down. It doesn't make complete sense, but perhaps we should remember that no matter whether we are at the beginning, the middle, or the end of life, we are often weak and vulnerable.

It seems to me that it's the idea of being weak and vulnerable that is more appropriate to Lent. The beating of our chests in remorse for our sins keeps us thinking we are butt dust. Too often in the history of the institutional church, Lent has been used to shame or otherwise motivate people to bow to the hierarchy in fear. I think looking at the season of Lent in this way has the potential of damaging our souls.

When we live in fear, we lose our self-worth. When we live in fear, we live under the assumption that we must always be strong and impenetrable. We stop believing that there is strength in weakness and that there is benefit to vulnerability. The problem with that is that we begin believing that we are the source of those assumed assets and forget that we need God. The problem is that when we believe that we are the source of our strength, we begin to believe others hold the sources of theirs. We put people on pedestals and then wonder why we're so upset when they show their weakness and vulnerability. It reminds us of our own.

That's the scary part, isn't it.

When we see the weakness and vulnerability of anyone we believe should be above that, it makes it so obvious that it's a part of our own nature. Mortality, in some ways, is easier to face because we all face it. It's the middle of the extremes that's difficult. It's the in between where we have to face the fact that we are really not the put together, perfect selves that we think we, or we think others, should be.

Lent isn't only about our sinfulness but it's also about our dustiness. It's about recognizing our mortality and serves as a reminder of just how much we rely on God's grace. The season helps us focus on the fact that it was through God's weakest and most vulnerable moment that our salvation, and the salvation of the world, was assured. And, if God was willing to take on our nature in and through Jesus of Nazareth, our own nature is of infinite value. We may be dust, but we are the dust formed by our Creator who breathed life into us and everything on earth. We are worthy in our imperfection to be forgiven. We are worthy, in our weakness, to be made strong. We are worthy, in our dustiness, to be loved.

No ifs, ands, or buts!