

Reflection Ash Wednesday 2023

From a reflection by **Mary Ann Steutermann**

Being human means being both blessed and broken, and Ash Wednesday invites us to look at our own brokenness in a way that can bring healing, strength, and courage. Brokenness is never the goal. We have another word that captures our essence as incomplete all on our own. That word is vulnerable.

To be vulnerable is to be exposed, to be open. Being vulnerable means that the parts of ourselves that are not strong and beautiful are visible to others. Brene Brown believes vulnerability is *“having the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcome.”*

Life affords many opportunities to choose to accept vulnerability. We can choose to share our feelings in a relationship without knowing how the other person will respond. We can choose to take a chance on a new career path, knowing that we may not succeed. But life also forces us into brokenness entirely against our will.

In the beatitudes Jesus gave us a blueprint to help us honour our broken parts as a means of growth and transformation. He taught that being vulnerable, being poor or meek, feeling sorrowful or persecuted offers us an opportunity to encounter the divine.

Suffering has a way of stripping us of our ego and false notions of self-sufficiency, which makes room for an experience of the divine. In accepting our faults, challenges, and pain, we create a space for God’s grace to work in us.

Allowing ourselves to be vulnerable helps us accept our brokenness. The dust of Ash Wednesday is a powerful reminder of the vulnerability that is part of our spiritual DNA as human beings. Ash Wednesday reminds us less about death and more about the mystery of vulnerability in life. It calls us to rethink our purpose.

Repentance is an invitation to make room in our hearts and lives for a God who wants to fill up our empty spaces and doesn’t take no for an answer. Its Latin root is *paenitentia* that really means a sense of “lacking.” Repentance, then, accepts that we do not hold all the cards, that we are not “enough” on our own. It helps us embrace our vulnerability and brokenness. The dust of Ash Wednesday reminds us that life is larger than our individual experiences of it. We are not in control. We aren’t always able to choose the kinds of vulnerability we experience. Life forces us into brokenness entirely against our will.

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If Ash Wednesday can remind us less about death and more about the mystery of vulnerability in life, it may call us to rethink the purpose of repentance which is not all about feeling guilty and ashamed of our shortcomings. The Latin root is *paenitentia* ultimately means a sense of “lacking.” Repentance becomes an acceptance of the fact that we do not hold all the cards, that we are not “enough” on our own. It’s a way of embracing our vulnerability and brokenness. The dust of Ash Wednesday reminds us that life is larger than our individual experiences of it. We are not in control.