

Sermon for Ash Wednesday, 2020, at St. Andrew's Church, Kent

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Back in early November, as some of you know, I bought a new car—or at least a new-for-me car. This was not an easy decision. Yes, my old car, a 2006 Volkswagen, had almost 220,000 miles—but all through last summer and into the fall I had a notion that somehow, if I just put a little money into it, if I just took care of the basics, all would be well. I could keep things running smoothly.

And so I ignored the warning signs or found ways to adapt and pretend there was not a real issue. The windshield wiper on the back window stopped spraying wiper fluid, so I decided I could just clean the window myself from time to time. Somehow the cable to the parking brake became detached, but I assured myself that the parking pad at my apartment on campus is on flat ground, and so too is Main Street here in Kent by the church—so I'd be okay; I'd get by. The rear window on the passenger side stopped working and started slipping open on its own from time to time. A little fresh air is a good thing, I told myself, but maybe not in sub-freezing temperatures, so I tried taping it closed with duct tape. Then things got more serious. The engine light went on—something to do with the fuel pump and rather expensive to fix, said my friends at D & S Auto, but also not a safety issue and not something that would stop the car from running—so I persevered with an engine light that went off and on sporadically. I don't know

what was the final straw. Perhaps it was something big—the thermostat warning beeping when I turned on the car, saying the engine was too cold (which was no problem because it stopped beeping if I turned off the car and restarted the engine). Perhaps it was something small—the battery in my key running out of power—so I had to unlock the car door the old fashioned way (manually). Perhaps it wasn't the car itself. It might have been that moment when I thought about going up to Boston to visit friends and I found myself wondering if the car would make it. Something in there caused me to admit the dark blue 2006 Volkswagen Golf, the car I had had for over ten years, was hopelessly and irretrievably broken, that there was no hope for it—that, if I convinced a dealer to give me anything for it in a trade, I would be doing well—and that it was time for something new.

Ash Wednesday and Lent are a time when we as people of faith admit that we, much like my car, are broken beyond repair—or at least beyond any measures that we might take to fix ourselves. Too often we try to ignore this. We try to pretend that we're fine, or we make excuses for our behavior, even if in the back of our minds, in our consciences, we know all too well how we fall short of God's expectations for us. On this day, in the words of the Collect for Ash Wednesday, we pray for the grace to worthily lament our sins and acknowledge our wretchedness. In a way, our check engine light is flashing, and finally we're trying to do something about it. Much as I went through a list of all of the things wrong

with my car, the Litany of Penitence goes through the many, many ways we fall short of God's expectations for us—of what he created us to be. We fail to love Him, and we fail, in so many ways, to love our neighbors as ourselves.

That is what the ashes of Ash Wednesday are about. As I put the ashes on you, as I put the ashes on myself, I say these words: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." That is the ultimate recognition that we, on our own, living alone, living selfishly and without the love of God, are hopelessly broken, because what are those ashes but the liturgical recognition of that junk heap where our broken bodies and selves will some day end up? Like the ashes, like the brokenness of my car, all of our attempts at self-aggrandizement, at self-promotion, and selfishness, at living our lives in broken ways, leave us in the dust bins of history, forgotten and irrelevant.

But there is hope for us. Please note that I have been careful never to say that we are hopelessly beyond repair—because we are not *hopelessly* beyond repair. There is hope for us in the love of God for us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Says the Prophet Joel, "Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing." God is gracious and merciful; God abounds in steadfast love for us. Thus, as I say those words pronouncing us as nothing more than terminal cases destined for the dust bin, I also make the sign of the cross, the sign of God's

infinite love for us despite our brokenness, despite our sinfulness, despite our selfishness.

In Jesus, God has seen the worst we can do, yet he still loves us and yearns for us to repent, to change our ways—something that begins with our recognition of our brokenness. And so in Lent we cling to that sign of the cross, adopting practices of prayer, fasting, and self-denial that are meant, not for self-aggrandizement, as today's Gospel points out, but as a way to bring us closer to recognizing our need for the love of God in our lives, of recognizing our complete and total dependence on the love of God for repentance and renewal of life. The measures of self-denial that we take in Lent are not a way we pronounce ourselves holier than thou; they are simply a means by which we acknowledge our constant need for repentance.

And so tonight, here in this holy place, let us admit our brokenness before God. Let us quit pretending that all is well with us. Let us embrace those ashes as a sign that, without the love of God, there is no health in us. And let us ask for the grace and strength of God to be with us, enabling us to be the gracious men and women God created us to be, during this season of Lent and always. Amen.