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Observing Ash Wednesday 2021

“What shall we do about Ash Wednesday?” How this question gets answered in any particular place should take account of local factors, but there are also some overarching principles that take precedence. In other words, liturgical liberty, if not bounded by reasonable parameters, can quickly become liturgical license, and that which one congregation does, in this age of communication and cross-congregation relationships, affects other congregations. The Lutheran doctrine on adiaphora (FC SD X),¹ providing a salutary clarification on the interpretation and application of the *satis est* principle (CA VII),²

¹The teaching on adiaphora was formalized in the *Solid Declaration* of the *Formula of Concord* (1577) in response to disagreements among Lutherans regarding which rituals and disciplines were acceptable and which must be resisted. This controversy had its roots in the Augsburg Interim (1548) but bloomed in response to the Leipzig Interim (1548). Central to the controversy was a compromise whereby the Lutherans were given some freedoms with respect to preaching but were compelled to accept certain rituals and disciplines. Some of the Lutherans deemed this acceptable while others argued that the imposed rituals and disciplines undermined the gospel and evangelical freedom.

The term *adiaphora* was harvested from Greek philosophy. Lutherans used the term to refer to that which is deemed indifferent, *i.e.*, neither contributing to nor detracting from that which is essential, and, for application within the particular scope of this paper, the essential is defined by the *satis est* (see *infra* fn. 2). *N.B.*, that a matter is deemed to be indifferent does not mean that it is unimportant, and, under certain circumstances, an adiaphoron ceases to be an adiaphoron. Precisely because an adiaphoron may cease to be an adiaphoron and because an adiaphoron may be more or less salutary, a blithe dismissal of the complexities involved or a cavalier handling of adiaphora is, at minimum, unbecoming, and potentially deleterious to the spiritual well-being of the faithful.

²*Satis est* may be translated as “it is enough” or “it is sufficient.” It appears in the third sentence of Article VII of the Latin text of the *Augsburg Confession*: “*Et ad veram unitatem ecclesiae satis est consentire de doctrina evangelii et administratione sacramentorum*,” which the Kold-Wengert edition of the *Book of Concord* translates as “And it is enough for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments.” The question of the unity of the church was consequential. The Reformers held, as did their Roman Catholic detractors, the Cyprianic maxim, “*extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the church there is no salvation).” Since one of the predicates of the church was unity, defining where there was sufficient unity was not merely a question of church order; it was a question of soteriology. In response to charges that the Wittenberg Reformers had departed from the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church,” deviation in liturgical practice being adduced as a prime example, the Reformers claimed that the *true* unity of the church depended not upon uniformity in rituals devised by men, depending instead upon agreement concerning the teaching of the gospel in purity and right administration of the sacraments according to that gospel.

The full Kolb-Wengert translation of the Latin article is

(continued...)

commends neither liturgical anarchy nor self-indulgent idiosyncratic practice.

No pure adiaphoron, so long as it remains an adiaphoron, shall save us, nor shall it damn us. An adiaphoron, however, may have greater or lesser utility in the promulgation of the Gospel and in the cultivation of piety. Furthermore, an adiaphoron may be made a matter of rule, *i.e.*, something to be done or not or something otherwise regulated. In other words, something may be an adiaphoron, but I am still under obligation to do it (or not) according to the rules set by the ecclesiastical authorities because, as the *Formula of Concord* states,

Therefore, we believe, teach, and confess that the community of God in every time and place has the right, power, and authority to change, to reduce, or expand such practices according to circumstances in an orderly and appropriate manner, without frivolity or offense, as seems most useful, beneficial, and best for good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the building up of the church (FC SD X:9, Kolb-Wengert ed.).

It is in light of this, our common confession, that I offer these thoughts that they might help us all engage the challenges posed by a pandemical Ash Wednesday with an idea of managing our adiaphora in an “orderly and appropriate manner, without frivolity or offense, as seems most useful, beneficial, and best for good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the building up of the church.”

²(...continued)

Likewise, they teach that one holy church will remain forever. The church is the assembly of the saints in which the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly. And it is enough for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by human beings be alike everywhere. As Paul says [Eph. 4:5, 6]: “One faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all . . .”

The Kolb-Wengert translation of the German is

It is also taught that at all times there must be and remain one holy, Christian church. It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel.

For it is enough for the true unity of the Christian church that there the gospel is preached harmoniously [*einträchtiglich*] according to a pure understanding and the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that uniform ceremonies, instituted by human beings, be observed everywhere. As Paul says in Ephesians 4[:4-5]: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”

Satis est, *i.e.*, the gospel taught purely and the sacraments administered rightly, remains the prime criterion among Lutherans for church unity and practice, though it would be intellectually dishonest not to admit that disagreements continue as to what precisely constitutes agreement on the teaching of the gospel and what precisely constitutes right administration of the sacraments.

Ash Wednesday is an adiaphoron

While Ash Wednesday is a long-beloved observance in the Lutheran church, the observance and those rites pertaining thereunto are not *per se* essentials of the faith. Whether Ash Wednesday is observed or not neither affects nor effects our salvation. The Word that is preached on Ash Wednesday, however, is not an adiaphoron, but there is no requirement that that Word be limited to Ash Wednesday, just as there is no requirement that the preaching of the Word regarding the death and resurrection of Our Lord be limited to the *Triduum*.³

While an adiaphoron, we have found it to be a useful adiaphoron. It has provided an occasion for the preaching of the Word. More importantly, it has provided an occasion for preaching specific aspects of the Word that might otherwise be ignored. It has also been an aid in the cultivation of piety, especially as it invites us in Lenten discipline.

There are good reasons to observe Ash Wednesday, but those reasons should be balanced against other factors which may militate against observance or, at least, observance as we have experienced heretofore. We sometimes forget that there have been congregations that have not observed Ash Wednesday for lack of clergy or simply because it was never their local tradition. This year, some congregations will opt not to observe because of challenges posed by the pandemic. Still others will modify their observance to be online, just as they have done with regular Sunday worship.

Ashes are adiaphora

³The three days that embrace Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Vigil. To be clear, it is not essential that there be an Ash Wednesday service. It is essential that the gospel be preached “harmoniously [*einträchtiglich*] according to a pure understanding” (CA VII:2, Kolb-Wengert ed.), but this is the case whether it be Ash Wednesday or not. One should not construe what is said here to mean that one must hold an Ash Wednesday service. One should, sooner or later, preach the Word that is topically appropriate to the Ash Wednesday observance, but one is not limited to the day itself for such preaching. So, if one is going to preach on Ash Wednesday, do so harmoniously according to a pure understanding. If one is going to hold a service on Ash Wednesday, it would be meet, right, and salutary to preach harmoniously according to a pure understanding, assuming the service is one that normally includes preaching—it would be strange to preach at compline. If one is not going to hold a service on Ash Wednesday, then, by all means, preach at some other time harmoniously according to a pure understanding, and one would do well to preach at some time on those themes associated with Ash Wednesday.

For many of us who qualify for an AARP card, we remember a time when ashes in Lutheran congregations were a novelty. I didn't see ashes, except on Roman Catholic foreheads, until I went to college, and then it was because I hiked up the hill to the seminary for the service.

Ashes are clearly adiaphora. They are not a sacrament. Whether ashes are employed or not is not a question that nullifies the proclamation of the Word. While I might not be thrilled with an Ash Wednesday without ashes, I would certainly not consider it blasphemous. I believe that ashes are, in most cases, helpful, but it cannot be claimed that they are a *sine qua non*.⁴

Ash Wednesday without ashes

As I have mentioned, the reintroduction of ashes as a fairly common practice among American Lutherans has taken place within the living memory of our elder church members. It would be wicked to suggest that their piety was somehow deficient simply because ashes were not part of their observance. History should serve as a reminder that many of those things that we consider normative today have not always been so. Additionally, history shows us alternatives to current practice. Frequently, when faced with some new challenge, we ask, "What new thing can we do to address this?" In this case, we might better ask, "What old thing can we do to address this?" If our ancestors (and some of our own members) could hear the Word and enter into the season of Lent without ashes, might we do the same? Ironically, this may be the year that our Lenten fast begins with a fasting from the ashes.

In thinking about the Ash Wednesday liturgy, it is important to dissect it in such a way that we see its principal parts. The distinctive aspect of the Ash Wednesday liturgy is the penitential rite. Ashes are part of that penitential rite, but not an indispensable part. The ashes with their associated liturgical action are a symbolic support to the penitential rite, but the penitential rite stands on its own without the ashes. The reverse cannot be said to be the case. Ashes without a penitential rite of some sort are shorn of

⁴Something indispensable, an absolute necessity, or "without which, not."

their context and risk becoming superstitious symbols rather than serving their proper role as pedagogic symbols.

All this is to say that the penitential rite can be used without the ashes as it had been for generations upon generations of American Lutherans.

Preaching on Ash Wednesday

Beyond that, the place of the sermon should not be forgotten. It was once common not to celebrate the Eucharist in connection with Ash Wednesday. The inclusion of the Eucharist in the Ash Wednesday observance was part and parcel of the move for greater Eucharistic frequency. Current conditions may militate against Eucharistic celebrations in many settings. The sermon, however, can still be preached and should be preached (dare I say, must be preached) and even more so this Ash Wednesday than any other since the Spanish Flu. That many places may go without the words, “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return” in connection with the thumbing of ash into the penitent’s forehead simply means it is time to preach those words with greater fervor and greater clarity. It would be meet, right, and salutary to hear from the pulpit an honest reckoning with mortality.

Decorum and ashes

That ashes are, in themselves, adiaphora does not imply that there is no decorum to be observed surrounding their use should we chose to use them just as there is a certain decorum to be observed in the placement of the Christmas tree (*e.g.*, we would not place the Christmas tree in the baptismal font). Should a church chose to employ ashes, we should be careful not to engage in flights of unnecessary liturgical fancy. Often, a rush to do something circumvents intense critical thought about the implications and ramifications of such action. True, there are times one must act even without due consideration of implications and ramifications, but we are talking about ashes, not rescuing a drowning person. No one is going to die if there are no ashes this year, therefore, it is hard to conceive of this as some sort of

liturgical emergency. If it is not an emergency, there is no need to take emergency measures. It should be considered that even those of us in the emergency services practice what we do in emergencies. Why? Because an emergency is not really the time to go off half-cocked. If we fool ourselves into thinking that this is a liturgical emergency, we are likely to go off half-cocked as we seldom practice such emergencies, and going off half-cocked can have unfortunate consequences.

Glitter ashes

Though not connected with the pandemic, I fully expect to see that somewhere in the church somebody will add glitter to their ashes. What was first started as an act of LGBTQ solidarity is likely to pop up this year because somebody will think that ashes are a downer and that we all need cheering up. Don't! The power of the Gospel is the power to stare unflinchingly into the maw of death. We wear the ashes because we know we are going to die. We don't pretend that death is not real for us. Our hope is not in pretending that death is not real but rather in the conviction that death is not the last word. We also wear the ashes to remember whereof we are made. We are dust and to dust we shall return. In this is our raw solidarity, one often forgotten. We are dust among dust. All humanity is dusty-kin. Adulteration of the ashes with glitter distracts from this thing that binds us together regardless of race, creed, color, party, or tribe. We wear the ashes as an act of penance, and there is nothing glittery about that.

Gloved imposition

There is no canonical reason one cannot use a glove to impose ashes.⁵ One will want to practice first and maybe with different gloves to see which works best. The biggest issue here will be the fact that one is thumbing multiple people. Does one sanitize between each person? Does one put a sponge with alcohol or some other disinfectant within reach to dab one's thumb between each head?

⁵While there is no canonical prohibition with respect to gloves, we may still consider the method less than decorous. Certainly, extreme conditions, *e.g.*, imposition in an isolation ward in the hospital, may dictate the use of gloves. What is good for the extreme, however, may not be good for the routine. Some practices that we adopt for the pandemic may be good for the pandemic, but that does not mean that they are good for normal times.

Masked imposition

There is no liturgical reason one cannot wear a mask when imposing. Obviously the recipient cannot wear a face shield.

Sprinkling ashes on the head

It is also the custom in some Christian communities to sprinkle ashes over the crown of the penitent's head instead of thumbing a cross into the forehead. This has not been common among us, but we would not deny its liturgical legitimacy. This may be the best option for those wanting to retain the administration of ashes without involving physical contact.

Q-tip ashes

The administration of blessing oils with a swab is not uncommon, especially when the oil is considered particularly precious or rare. One might consider administering ashes with a swab, but sprinkling, as described above, stands within the broader tradition of the church.

Self-imposition

While there is no strict thing that says one cannot self-impose, if one thinks about the form, one can see that there is a formal difference between thumbing oneself and being thumbed by someone else. Agency is a thing, and there is a difference between me acting upon myself and someone else acting upon me. This is the reason why I usually have someone thumb me when I administer ashes. I experience the words, "Remember you are dust...", differently when the other addresses me with those words as they thumb the ash into my forehead.

Relative risk

If one deems it too risky to administer ashes, one should not. In the sprinkling method, there is probably no more risk involved than one would encounter going through the McDonald's drive-thru.

Still, we each have our own risk tolerances. The question may, however, be largely moot if the majority of our congregations are not holding in-person worship.

Ashes on the go

I've spoken about this before at continuing ed (January 2017). Remembering that ashes support the penitential rite and not the other way around, one should consider the form employed in ashes on the go. What is the penitential rite? Where is the confession of sin? Where is the exhortation to repent and enter into the discipline of Lent? Without these things, the form is deficient. Granted, one may be able to develop a much abbreviated form, but these elements should not be neglected.

It should also be remembered that Ash Wednesday is not a disconnected liturgical observance. It is connected to the whole of Lent. Its function is to invite into Lent and begin Lent. The administration of ashes on the go without a clear invitation and exhortation with respect to Lent is deficient. To accept ashes without the slightest intention to enter into Lent betrays a failure to understand the ashes. To impose ashes without the slightest intention to encourage Lenten discipline in the recipient betrays an equal failure to understand the ashes.

Some would say people are too busy to sit through an Ash Wednesday service. Are they equally too busy for Lent? Some would say that the timing of the Ash Wednesday service is inconvenient for people. Are we clergy too busy to offer more than one service? A perfectly acceptable Ash Wednesday service can be conducted in 30 minutes, and that is with full *LBW* penitential rite, sermon, and even Eucharist (assuming you cut out all but one lesson, get to the point of your sermon, and dispense with various non-essentials such as hymns and the like).

Some would say that it is important to get the Gospel out in the street for people to hear. I agree, but ashes are not the Gospel. In fact, if the only thing we do is a smudge with the words, "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return," we have not given them the Gospel. We have given the Law (The Hammer of Jeremiah) and only the Law. We are like those folks who scream the Law at passers-by

except we are dressed better and are more polite. One could say that those who scream the Law are doing a better job than us because, at least, they tell people to repent. If all we do is smudge and say the *memento homo*,⁶ we do nothing more than tell the people they are going to die. There is nothing particularly polite about that.

Drive-thru ashes

Some of the same questions raised by ashes on the go should likewise be raised here. Will there be a penitential rite? Will there be a confession of sin? Will there be an exhortation to the discipline of Lent? Furthermore, what Gospel will be preached to balance the Law that is the *memento homo*? This is not to say that it cannot be done. It is to say that there are elements that should not be ignored.

Mail-ashes

Again, we have the same questions as those for drive-thru ashes, but, in this case, there seems to be an even greater superstitious element.

Ashies

Some of us are veterans of the “Ash Wars,” the lesser known fight to get ashes into the liturgical observance of Lutheran congregations. Few remember the intensity of Anti-Catholicism that prevailed at one time in Lutheran congregations. I can still hear the voices of beloved parishioners objecting to ashes and aptly quoting the Gospel text appointed for the day that roundly warns us against parading our piety before others. Those of us who fought to reintroduce ashes assured people that we do not take the ashes as a way to show our piety before others. We talked about the way in which external acts of piety help us to interiorize piety. We talked about Christian piety being something not thought well of by the general population, in other words, not earning any admiration from our neighbors, especially those who hated

⁶*Memento homo quia pulvis es et in pulverem reverteris* (Remember, Man, you are dust, and to dust you shall return).

Catholics. Then came Facebook and Instagram, *etc.*, *etc.*, and with them, eventually, came “ashies,” a selfie in which the subjects proudly display their ashes. “Ashies” are not enough to make me say, “Time to get rid of the ashes.” *Abusus non tollit usum*.⁷ Still, we need to help people understand that ashes are neither talisman nor fashion statement.

Closing thought

This “ashies” phenomenon should nudge us to self-examination. To what degree is it symptom of a degeneration of piety? It is with that question that we might examine ourselves and ask: Have we become fixated upon the ashes to the point that we would amend this adiaphoron in a disorderly and inappropriate manner, with frivolity and offense, not as seems most useful, beneficial, and best for good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the building up of the church, but out of our desperation to retain this adiaphoron at all costs? When we are so desperate to retain an adiaphoron that we would do so in contravention of the *Formula*’s principle, we might consider that we have begun to treat this adiaphoron as if it were an essential.

✠Riegel

⁷Abuse does not cancel use.