
Holy Hacks: February 21, 2020

By the Rev. Julia Mitchener

Ashes, ashes, we all fall down!

Well, I did it. I did something I thought I couldn't, or shouldn't, do. I decided not to volunteer for one of the teacher breakfasts at my children's school. I usually sign up dutifully as soon as my turn comes around, committing to bringing paper products, fruit salad (purchased already washed and cut by the nice people at Publix), or baked goods (yep, you guessed it—from a bakery, not my kitchen). This time, though, when I checked the signup list, all the easy stuff had been taken. The only jobs left involved arriving at school at 7 a.m. carrying either a hot casserole or an umbrella for standing outside to run carpool during yet another of our Morning Monsoons. So I did it (or, rather, I didn't do it). I closed my laptop, assuaged my guilt with half a sleeve of Thin Mints, and went on with my day.

Let me say that my opting out had nothing to do with a lack of appreciation for teachers. I stand in awe of teachers and think they deserve every single nod of appreciation we can possibly give them, including a whole lot more pay. No, this was not about a lack of appreciation for teachers. Rather, it was about giving myself a break when I just couldn't add another thing to my "to do" list.

Why do I bring this up now? Because it's almost Lent. And you know what that means. If you're old school, it means giving something up—chocolate, wine, Facebook, buying new clothes, you name it. More recently, though, a new idea has emerged, the idea of taking something on—a new spiritual discipline, a new commitment at church or in the wider community. It's a concept that has merit, but it's not for me, not this year. Maybe it's not for you, either. Or maybe it is. Only you can know. Taking on a new commitment to daily prayer, volunteering at a local charity over the course of several weekends, reducing your carbon footprint by adopting some new household practices—all of these are marvelous, worthy, important things. If they help you make progress on your spiritual journey and feel life-giving (hint: there's a connection between the two), then, by all means, do them. But if they serve only to further the debilitating feelings of guilt, overwhelm, and inadequacy with which a lot of harried parents already struggle, please just don't. Don't do them. Not now. There will be time later.

One of the great challenges of parenthood is bumping up hard against our own limitations. There is nothing like having a sick child wailing in your ear while you talk on the phone with the washing machine repair man, deal with the Mormons at the front door, and try to meet a work deadline, all at the same time—there is nothing like this to make you realize you do not have it all together. You don't have it even halfway together. You are a hot mess.

This is one of the reasons I love the sentence spoken during the imposition of ashes each Ash Wednesday. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." This is not just a statement about human finitude, it is a statement about human limitation. You and I come from the dust. We are made from clay. Messy from our birth. As parents, our lives become messier still. Our faces get smudged by our children's sticky fingers, and our calendars get smudged by the commitments we sometimes have to erase just to stay sane.

Lent gives us a chance to think about these smudges not as failings but as part of the normal pattern of life. It gives us the opportunity to see ourselves more as God sees us—people who are loved not because of all that we do but simply because we are. People who sometimes forget to show up for meetings. People who get so

busy we can't do some things we'd really like to do, things that are important to do. People who have the best of intentions about prayer, composting, giving to the March of Dimes, not yelling at our children or nagging our spouses. People whose lives are messy. People made from the red Georgia clay who will someday return to the red Georgia clay (or to the golden sand of the Arizona desert or the rocky gray terrain of the New England coast or the rich black soil of the Mississippi Delta). People who are smudged, yet beautiful just the same. Remember that you are dust. You are a hot mess. And you are loved.

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