

Ash Wednesday, 2010
St. Mary's Church
Fr. Michael Renninger

Sing along with me now: "Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow!"

As I prepare to preach this homily, the east coast is bracing for yet another arctic blast. Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington are covered in several FEET of snow. Richmond is still reeling from record setting snow falls. 49 states have snow on the ground. In some way, everyone is "walking in a winter wonderland!"

Last Saturday morning, long after we had decided to cancel all of the Saturday activities at our church, I looked out my window at the rectory. And it was beautiful! Everything looked clean, bright, lovely. Every inch of ground was covered with a pure, white blanket.

But, by noon on Monday, the thermometer reached 40 degrees. Puddles were forming everywhere. What *had* looked clean, bright and lovely now looked splotchy, muddy and brown. The light and heat of the sun were quickly changing the landscape. It had looked so nice...but now the covering was melting away, and we could see that underneath the lovely façade was dirt, mud, and grit. All because of the light and heat of the sun.

Today, we begin the holy season of Lent. I'd like to suggest that the goal of Lent is this: to allow the light and heat of the Son of God to melt away the lovely facades with which we like to cover ourselves. One goal of Lent is to allow the light and warmth of Christ to melt the facades away, so that we can deal honestly with some of the grit, grime and mud of our lives. We *need* a season like this!

We need a season like this, because most of us like to *pretend*. We like to pretend that we're 'doing just fine.' We like to cover ourselves with a lovely veneer which projects a beautiful image of ourselves. So many of us work so hard to cover up the truth of our messy lives – our messy selves – with a snow-like mantle of control and competence. When others look at us – when we look at ourselves – we want to look like we've got it all together. We like to look as though we're well along the path to holiness, happiness, fidelity, forgiveness, reconciliation, and reasonable maturity. We get so good at pretending. We stare at the lovely false self we've created, and we begin to forget. We forget that, just below the surface, we are often a muddy mess.

So we begin Lent. And, if we dare, we say to God, "O.K. I'm going to be vulnerable to you! O.K., Lord. I'll stop pretending. Yes, Lord. Send your Son, with the warmth of his love and the light of his Gospel, and - this Lent - melt my façade away. Melt it away, so that I can begin to deal honestly with the grit and grime in my life."

We begin Lent with that ancient, odd ritual: we come forward, and allow a brother or sister to place a smudged cross of dirt smack in the middle of our forehead. Then we go out to dinner, and get odd looks from the waiter!

Don't you see? The Church smudges dirt on the *outside* of me, so that I will invite Christ to help me deal with the dirt on the *inside* of me – the messy grit of my life that I usually like to cover-up with my snow-white self-regard, my smugness, my blankets of denial.

Do you dare? Do you dare come forward for that smudged cross? Make no mistake – Christ is ready to come to you, right now, right in Lent. Christ is ready to come to you, to melt your hardened heart and heal your broken mess. Will you *let* him come that close? Will

you let him help you with your anger, your fear, your judgment? Will you let him come and calm your fears of the future, the pain of your past, the emptiness of your present? Aren't you tired of the envy, greed, lust, smallness of vision, frustrations, impatience which bubble up from deep within? Are you weary of the illness, the addiction, the pain?

Christ wants to transform you this Lent. What it takes, on your part and mine, is a little courage – the courage to let Christ get close enough to shed his light and spread his warmth in your life. He is not afraid of the mess and grit of your life! He knows it better than you do! And...he loves you. He loves you – he who knows what you try so hard to keep secret.

And, guess what? As soon as you confess that you have a heart and life full of messiness and imperfection, you find the freedom which enables you to be reconciled with every other imperfect human being. If I know that Christ loves me – ME! – with all my sin, then I am free to stop demanding perfection of others. Christ's love for "Messy Me" gives me the freedom to love "Messy Others."

Who has driven you crazy lately? Who frightens you? Who hurt you recently? Who broke your heart? Who has gotten on your last nerve? Well... all of them, ALL OF THEM, are just like you: they are human beings, created in the image of God, pretending to have it all together. But just below the façade of their lives, lurks the grime and grit and mess you've got in yours.

So...come forward today. Receive on your forehead the smudged sign of salvation. And know this: Jesus already knows the truth of your life. He knows it better than you do. And, knowing it all, he comes your way tonight, to love you, love you, love you.