

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer
February 17, 2010 - Ash Wednesday
“Ashes, Ashes, We All Fall Down”

I don't need to say much tonight. The Scripture readings, our prayers, and the anointing of ashes say as much as any of my own words can say. So I'll be brief. And simply do some reflecting on the nursery rhyme I quoted as the title of this meditation: “Ring around the rosy, a pocket full of posies, ashes, ashes, we all fall down”. It's a rhyme that children sang during the Black Death years in the middle ages, when hundreds of thousands of people died from the bubonic plague. It has a grim reality to it --- and the juxtaposition of little children singing and dancing to a song about people dying --- well, that's not normally what we think of when we recite a nursery rhyme. But it's appropriate, I think, for our time together tonight. These ashes that will mark our foreheads are a grim reminder of the reality of both our human sinfulness and our human mortality. “Ashes, ashes, we all fall down”, is the way it is. We do all fall down --- we mess up, we stumble, we make mistakes, we do things we know we shouldn't do, we hurt others, we hurt ourselves, we hurt God. We all fall down. We all sin and fall short of the glory of God, as the old Book of Common Prayer language puts it. That's our reality. It's our reality on Ash Wednesday; it's our reality every day of every year. We may not like admitting it – and we might get uncomfortable admitting it in public, especially in church, but it's still true. We all fall down. Not one of us has gone through life so far without sinning --- whether in big ways or little ways, whether we get caught or not, whether we've had to pay any noticeable consequence or not – we've all sinned.

This afternoon I reflected with those who attended our noon service that none of us come here today with a perfect score, that like the Winter Olympic athletes, we are watching on our televisions, we have all had points taken away, so to speak. For our failures, for our falls, for our going over the foul lines, for purposely running into or knocking down or just pushing away someone else. None of us is as good as we'd like to be. This falling down is something we've all done, and something we all are still doing. I am under no illusions that the people I pastor are sinless. Some of your sins I know something about – many I don't. This does not discourage me. It's why we have a church, after all. To come together as real people and hear a real word that will make a difference in our real lives. Real lives that include the reality of falling down. I have never stood before you as one who hasn't fallen down, either. That's how it is. We all fall down. As sinners – but also as mortal humans. There is a kind of falling down we all will do that we can't do anything about – and that's the falling down we call death. Again, not something we like thinking or talking about, but something that is as real as anything else in our lives. We are mortal, finite, human creatures. Death will take its toll on every single one of us. None of us will live on earth forever. Sickness, accident, old age, war, murder, starvation, suicide, natural disaster – you name it, something will cause us to die. Death is an unavoidable inescapable fact of our human reality. Ashes, ashes, we all fall down is how ever grim a succinct statement of our human condition. A condition we are reminded of in this service tonight, as we offer our prayers of confession and as we receive the mark of ashes on our foreheads – the ashes of repentance, the ashes of mortality.

But there's more. What happens when the children sing and dance this nursery rhyme? After they fall down, what do they do next? That's right, they get up again – and sing and dance the rhyme all over again. And they sing and dance it all over again – together. It's a rhyme that's played with a circle of children – holding hands, falling down, and getting back up. To me that's a good image of who we are and what we're doing here tonight as well. We are people who fall down. But we are also people who get back up again. Sins are confessed, mistakes are admitted, and forgiveness is received. We are given the opportunity for new beginnings – for getting back up, for righting the wrongs, for correcting the mistakes, for starting over. Our human sinfulness isn't something to be ashamed of, in and of itself. To err is human, to be a sinner is a fact of life. It doesn't mean we're worthless creatures, or that we can't live full, helpful, loving lives. It means we mess up along the way – and that we need God's love to get us back on track, we need God's love to forgive and restore us. Which is what the sign of the cross is all about. The cross is a symbol, not just of death, but of life. Life in Christ. Forgiven and redeemed life. Life that has been saved. Life that is made new – over and over again made new, through the power and love of Jesus Christ.

Friends, we also have each other in this getting back up again part of the story. As the children hold hands when they play this nursery rhyme game, so do we have each other here in the church. I know there is a part of our Lenten journey that is private for each one of us, and that the church encourages us to engage in personal reflection and devotion and sacrifice. But there is a communal aspect of the journey, too. We are not disciples in

isolation. Our falling down and our getting back up again is something we have in common, and something that is part of our life together as a church. So we help each other, we encourage each other, maybe we even share honestly with each other about our falling down and our need to get back up. We have hands to hold – we do not make the journey of faith alone. So Lent is also a time for communal reflection and devotion and sacrifice. It's a time to be reminded of our dependence – not only on God, but on each other. I'm glad you're here tonight. When we leave this place, we will bear the same sign – a sign that we have been forgiven, a sign of mortality that has been acknowledged, a sign of the new life that has been received. May this be a holy Lent for you – and for us. Amen.