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FIRST WORD

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Terrace on Chicago, My Experiences

By Garrett Boyum

My experience with volunteering at Terrace on Chicago has been nothing but positive. I always look forward to it all throughout the year. I love talking to new people and interacting with members of our church that I usually wouldn't have the opportunity to. I love being a front line worker of our church's ministry and helping out with this event so our youth group can go on fun and meaningful trips.

I have volunteered at TOC four times, starting in 2022 when there was a global pandemic and it was renamed to "Takeout on Chicago". I made some very tasty pizzas that year. It was a lot of fun because it was just us kids working together in the gym preparing the pizzas. It was one of my first experiences hanging out with the older youth and it was a fun time. The next year for TOC I was a trip presenter. We get to pick out our own jobs and trip presenting was a job that nobody wanted to do, so I was delegated the task of doing it. It turned out to be incredibly fun, so fun that I did it the next year. This past year I had the opportunity to be a server, and that was very different but still a very enjoyable time. I loved being responsible for a table, having conversations with them, and making sure that they had a nice evening.

Terrace on Chicago has been an event that my friends and I always look forward to with excitement. There is never a dull moment during TOC, making fond memories, and having good times. I love sharing my gifts with my church family and giving them more than a nice meal, but a good experience. After all the events of TOC are over, a large group of kids go to Perkins. As much as I love TOC for all that it is, I love going out to Perkins afterward and eating some good food with good people. The whole event and atmosphere brings the best of friends even closer together. I love volunteering at Terrace on Chicago and am very excited to serve again this year.

Giving First, Generously, and Regularly

By DJ O'Neil

Some of the most important spiritual practices in our lives haven't come through big moments, but through small, repeated choices. For my wife and me, one of those has been giving. Early in our marriage, we tried to align our giving with what we saw in Scripture—to give first, give generously, and give regularly. Over time, that practice has quietly shaped our trust in God, our relationship with money, and our connection to His church.

GIVING FIRST means we give before anything else. Practically, that means we prioritize giving early—before taxes, budgeting, and spending—instead of waiting to see what's left at the end. Scripture calls God's people to bring Him their firstfruits: "Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce" (Proverbs 3:9). Giving first reminds us that while we earn a paycheck, our provision ultimately comes from God—He is the source of our abilities, opportunities, and livelihood.

GIVING GENEROUSLY for us has meant practicing the biblical tithe—a tenth. In the Old Testament, God instructs His people, "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse" (Malachi 3:10). In the New Testament, believers are encouraged to give willingly and joyfully: "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7). Choosing a tenth has provided a clear and simple starting point for living out that call to generosity.

GIVING REGULARLY means our giving is intentional and consistent. Early on, I tracked our giving manually each month. Today, it's largely automated, and I still reconcile it at the end of the year. Scripture encourages this kind of planned rhythm: "On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper" (1 Corinthians 16:2). For us, regular giving isn't accidental—it's a discipline.

Jesus says, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). That verse has helped us see that God's purposes are meant to be our true treasure, and money is simply a tool we use in service of them. Giving first, generously, and regularly has helped re-order our hearts in that direction. It has created healthier boundaries around spending, kept us from overextending ourselves, and connected us more deeply to the ministries we support. Giving draws us into the work God is doing—caring about the people, ministries, and missionaries we partner with, both here at First Free and beyond.

We also give because God calls us to. Giving is part of the Christian life and an act of obedience to Him. Scripture doesn't present generosity as a formula with guaranteed, immediate results. Yet time and again, we see that when God's people walk in His ways, it leads to life and blessing—even when we don't fully understand how or when.

If you're new to giving, I encourage you to start somewhere. If your giving has been inconsistent, consider establishing a simple rhythm. Pray about what obedience looks like for you and your family.

For us, giving first, generously, and regularly has been one of the most quietly formative spiritual disciplines in our lives. Over time, it has continually pointed us back to trust, dependence, and gratitude—and we're thankful for how God has used it to shape our walk with Him.

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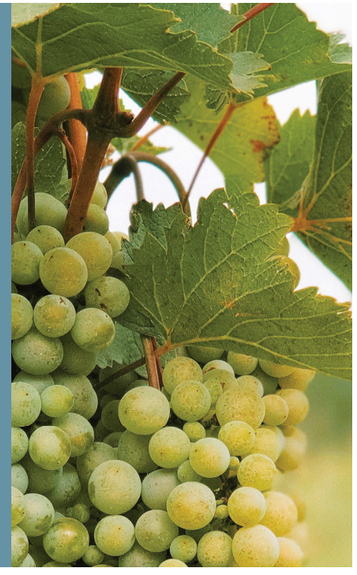

An Intro to Ash Wednesday at First Free

By Paul Anleitner

This year, we will mark the beginning of Lent with an Ash Wednesday Service on February 18th at 6:45 pm in the sanctuary. This is a new practice in our worship rhythms, so you may be wondering what Ash Wednesday is and why we've decided to hold a special service.

WHAT IS ASH WEDNESDAY?

Ash Wednesday marks the official beginning of Lent, a 40-day season (excluding Sundays) of reflection, repentance, and spiritual preparation for Easter.

> "Ash Wednesday is a spiritual practice that has proven beneficial for countless disciples of Jesus across time and culture."
>
> —Paul Anleitner

Christians across denominations, including Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists, and others, have commemorated the beginning of Lent with Ash Wednesday services for centuries. On Ash Wednesday, this special service has historically been focused on two theological themes: our mortality as finite creatures and our need for repentance.

As we journey towards the Cross and the Resurrection, we begin by soberly reflecting on the inevitable physical death of our mortal bodies and our need for Christ to redeem us from the "wages of sin" (Romans 6:23), which is the spiritual death of "the Fall" that estranged us from right relationship with God and others. By soberly contemplating these truths over the course of Lent, our hearts and minds become more aware of just how good the good news of the Gospel really is.

Perhaps the most famous feature of a typical Ash Wednesday service is the "imposition of ashes." This is where a minister of the Gospel places their finger in ash and traces the sign of the Cross on a worshipper's forehead as they recite Genesis 3:19:

"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

The practice of using ashes as a symbol of repentance is rooted in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. For the people of God in the Old Testament, covering oneself in sackcloth and ashes was a visceral, public display of grief or contrition. Also, as early as the second century, we have records of Christians receiving ashes from their leaders as they entered a period of fasting and repentance, leading up to Holy Week.

WHY ARE WE PRACTICING ASH WEDNESDAY?

One of our core values in worship at First Free is our appreciation for the wisdom of those faithful followers of Christ who have gone before us. Their insights can provide us with a beneficial counterbalance to our own modern cultural biases, which can often keep us from rightly understanding certain facets of the Biblical faith. While we have Biblical injunctions that Christians must gather regularly to worship God, we do not have specific commands on what times we must gather, what specific songs we must sing, or how long a sermon should go for.

The practice of Christians worshipping together on Ash Wednesday is not a Biblical command, but, like the recitation of the Apostle's Creed or the praying of the Lord's Prayer, it is a spiritual practice that has proven beneficial for countless disciples of Jesus across time and culture. As our surrounding culture becomes increasingly obsessed with technologies and techniques that aim to keep us young and beautiful forever, we believe this service can provide a necessary counterbalance to that cultural message and help shape in us a deeper appreciation for the message of Good Friday and Easter.

WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT?

Our Ash Wednesday service will be a 45 minute-1 hour liturgy of songs, prayers, and Biblical reflections on the primary themes of Ash Wednesday. Worshippers will also have the option to receive the imposition of Ashes during the service, administered by a team of lay leaders and ministry staff from our church.

You can expect an atmosphere that is quieter, more reflective, and perhaps more somber than a typical Sunday morning. This is a great service to invite a friend, family member, or neighbor who perhaps grew up in a church that practiced Ash Wednesday but is no longer part of a church, to reintegrate that practice into a revitalized journey of walking with Christ again.