

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, which is a 40 day period of purification before Easter. For many, this ritual provides an opportunity to reflect on one's life, make amends, and then celebrate the resurrection – Jesus' and their own – with abandon. For others it is a time of shaming and exclusion. The ashes mark a person as unholy and the deprivation of lent can become an act of self-abuse. Over the last couple of weeks I have read several explanations of Lent and Ash Wednesday. Some say that Ash Wednesday began as a way for those seeking baptism on Easter Sunday to prepare for this important rite. Others say that Ash Wednesday was observed by public penitents who were ostracized outside their community until Maundy Thursday for the sake of penance.

The queer community – those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender, as well as their allies, are ostracized outside of community enough, as far as I'm concerned. Those who are racially marginalized also feel the sting of being separated from what is considered "community" by those in power. On one hand, I cannot condone an act of potential oppression for a community that I love. On the other hand, I will not decide for anyone what is life-giving for them. So today I stand in the tension of wanting to encourage people to reflect on their lives for the sake of repentance and resurrection, and exhort our community to eschew all forms of oppression – especially religious ritual oppression.

What is life-giving to you? If you know that observing Ash Wednesday and Lent helps you focus on the coming celebration of the resurrection of Christ, then I believe you should put your whole heart into it. If you reject observing Ash Wednesday and Lent because you already feel branded with the ashes of disapproval and judgment, then I encourage you to live in the confidence of your being loved by your Holy Beloved.

Romans 14:5 & 6

*One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let everyone be fully persuaded in their own mind. If you regard the day, regard it because it helps you express your love of God. If you do not regard the day, do not regard it because it helps you express your love of God.*