

Return to God

A sermon for Ash Wednesday - February 17, 2021
St. Andrew Lutheran Church - Franklin, Tennessee
Matt. 6:1-6, 16-21- Julian Gordy

“Remember that you are dust, AND TO DUST YOU SHALL RETURN.” I remember the first time I presided at an Ash Wednesday liturgy. While I had spent a lot of time making sure that the folks at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Morristown, Tennessee would experience a liturgically proper and meaningful beginning to Lent, the one thing I was completely unprepared for was the experience of putting a smudge of ashes on the forehead of my then three-year-old daughter and reminding her that she was going to die. “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Saying “you are dust and to dust you shall return” to your own innocent, uncomprehending child rubs your face in your own mortality. Fresh-faced and smiling, she didn’t look like dust. In fact, death was a concept she didn’t own at the time.

You and I live in a culture that famously goes to great lengths to deny death. We pass away or pass on or cross over or join the church triumphant. Even our pets don’t die. They “cross the rainbow bridge.” Since we have so much trouble even saying the word “die,” it is ironic that on this day, we, along with Christians all over the world, pause from our death-denying to remind ourselves that we are mortal, that we are dust, that we will die. We are all perishable items, born with an expiration date. The freshest, youngest face among us will one day be laid to rest. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

But this year - this year when in the past eleven months nearly half a million Americans have died from COVID, this year when we are not gathering in person so that we don’t threaten each other with disease and death, maybe we have had to acknowledge a bit more truthfully than usual our existential reality, our mortality, the fragile nature of our existence. Maybe we know the mortality theme of Ash Wednesday well enough.

But it is not only our mortality that we acknowledge on Ash Wednesday. Here at the beginning of Lent, we also admit to one another that, in spite of our everyday posturing and defensiveness, we are, in fact, still sinners, people with some darkness inside us that we can't seem to get rid of. We've seen it as we watched an angry mob beat police officers at our nation's capitol. We've seen it in the intractable division that dogs everything we try to do. We know this is not what God wants of God's beloved people, but we can't seem to help ourselves.

We are here in this place because we are people who have put ourselves in God's place at the center of the universe. We are people who haven't lived up to what God has in mind for us, people who feel too keenly our own wants and interests and are hardly concerned at all with the needs and interests of others.

A very good case can be made that the long-lingering COVID pandemic has lingered so long because so many of us do not want to have our rights to do what we want inhibited in any way by the needs for safety of our neighbors.

In fact, we in the wealthy western world seem often to be more concerned with our first-world problems than we are with the serious inequity, violence, and want that grows around us. For example, the less-than-perfect meal we were served in the restaurant - back when going to the restaurant was a normal thing - distresses us more than the 1,042 in the world people who died of hunger-related causes during the hour it took us to eat that less-than-perfect meal.

On Ash Wednesday, we remember publically our sinful selfishness and our impending death by submitting to a pre-medieval ritual of smudging ashes on our foreheads and confessing our sins. For many of us, this day will be the beginning of forty days of prayer and fasting and doing good works which, when you think about it is about as counter-cultural a thing as one can do in a culture where most of us spend most of our time trying to *get* things, not give them up. I read this week that the latest trend in retail is pandemic purchasing - buying things we don't need but that might make us feel better as we continue our locked-down lives.

But Lent, at its heart, is not giving up things and feeling sorry or worrying about dying. At its very heart, Lent is about changing, about getting real about life and about ourselves. It is about turning *from* preoccupation with self and *toward* love for God and our neighbor. “Return to God with all your heart,” we sing in one of the gospel acclamations this time of year. That’s the repentance, the change that Lent calls us to.

For hundreds of years, the church has known that we need this yearly smudge of ashes, this annual reminder of our mortality, this reorientation. Because, left to our own devices, we get further and further from God. By our very nature, we look out for number one and don’t care enough about anyone else. It is all too easy for us to be seduced by the values of the world, to think that what is *not* ultimately important, *is* ultimately important.

Some of you know that our family lived on the Gulf Coast for 14 years. And as a way of getting ready for the Lenten fast, from the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6 through the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday, people celebrate the Mardi Gras season - not just a day, a season. During all that time, there are krewes and balls and king cakes and merriment of all kinds.

But the big events are the parades in every town from Pensacola to New Orleans and beyond. I remember hours of standing - with our kids and the dependable out-of-town Mardi Gras guests we had at our house every year - on Main Street in Biloxi , or Government Street in Mobile or St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans watching hundreds of people decked out in green, gold and purple, jumping and tussling for moon pies and plastic beads and other trinkets thrown off the floats by krewe members.

One year in Biloxi, I stood by an elderly woman who had just got out of the hospital for hip replacement surgery. Most people would have been at home, but there she was, hanging on to her walker, a large plastic bag to hold her catch tied onto it, screaming at the parade krewes, “throw me something, Mister.” Like the rest of us, she was hoping to catch whatever little piece of junk the carnival revelers would toss.

It’s funny if you think about it. Here were people who have lots of stuff, even real jewels, standing in the sun, or the rain, jostling with one another, trying their best to grab cheap plastic beads and trinkets, some

of them even resorting to decidedly uncharitable behavior to do so. Why do so many people do that?

Well, of course people do it because *it's great fun*. But it may also be a sad metaphor for the human experience. You wonder, are we like the Mardi Gras revelers, spending our time tussling for trinkets that only in the moment seem valuable, when God wants to give us something far, far more valuable - the abundant life Jesus calls us to?

We are caught up in ourselves, anxious about our stuff and our status, and we don't see how ridiculous we look jostling one another for a better chance at junk, a better time in the rat race, taking things that are temporary far more seriously than things that are eternal, scuffling for trinkets when God wants to give us life!

And so we need this annual Lenten spiritual sanity check-up, this spiritual pilgrimage back to the ground of our being. We need to remember what matters and what doesn't. We need to take stock of just how far we have wandered from the One who made and loves us. We need to ask ourselves some questions: Do our lives give evidence that we have "turned away from sin" and "toward the light of Christ," as some early Christian baptism liturgies put it? Are we headed down the right road? Are we putting first things first?

In this year of pandemic, we may not need a smudge of ashes to remind us of our mortality. But notice that that smudge of ashes is made in the shape of a cross, the sign that God loves us all unconditionally and inconceivably. We don't and can't do anything to deserve the free gift of God's love. Still, because God loves us, God wants the best for us, and so God calls us to change, to turn around, to follow Jesus to real and abundant life.

The grace of Lent is that every year it gives us another chance to look at ourselves - personally and as a community of believers. And, if we look foolish, if we are struggling for the wrong things, if we have been standing on the side of the street begging for trinkets instead of seeking the treasure that lasts, we are invited once again to change, to turn around and follow Jesus.