

Ash Wednesday, March 2, 2022

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Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

St. Andrew Lutheran Church, Franklin, TN

There's something really personal about Ash Wednesday. In our scripture, Jesus probes into our secret practices of devotion. Jesus and Isaiah challenge our self-serving motivations. And even as we receive ashes on our foreheads, we hear the psalmist plead for a transplant of heart and spirit.

It just feels very personal, even intrusive. To have ashes imposed on our foreheads disfigures our faces in a way. A reminder that, one day, death will impose itself on us. It truly is an imposition. A rude interruption to life that otherwise might skip along unnoticed.

But it's not as personal as it feels at first. When we look around to see everyone else's death marks, we realize that death is universal. We didn't expect to begin Lent with war in Ukraine, but here it is. And we realize that we all have death in common. Life is as fragile for people in Russia and Ukraine as for people in Tennessee. It's sobering.

But it's also something else — and please just go with me for a bit, Ash Wednesday's imposition of death is also liberating! Life-giving even!

I was startled one day when I asked a parishioner how he was doing, and he looked right at me and said, "Well, Pastor, I'm dying." Then, I guess he noticed my raised eyebrows, and he smiled and said "We're all dying. Everyday is one day closer to our death." Then we both chuckled as we realized the truth of it. Making a joke out of that truth felt freeing.

Another moment that stands out is, in a Synod Assembly sermon by our, then, bishop, Julian Gordy, he said, "You know, the mortality rate is still 100%." It was a humorous moment, as only Julian Gordy can pull off. I don't remember anything else about that sermon. But those words will never leave me, because they did something to me that day. Somehow we all

laughed at death that day, and it was robbed of its power. We were liberated from its hold.

In the graveside liturgy of every funeral we read this from 1 Corinthians:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

“Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

With those words we can look at death and say, “Do your worst.” Of course, we say it with appropriate solemnity; death is still a tragic truth which causes deep grief. But we say, “do your worst,” knowing also that it’s not the final truth.

It’s a paradox, maybe the ultimate paradox. It’s even included in the list of paradoxes we just heard in 2 Corinthians:

...we are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet we are well known; as dying, and see — we are alive...

Death treats us as if we’re dying when, in fact, we are even more fully alive. Because when we live each day in the truth that we will return to dust, we are less likely to let our life skip right on by — with one day following another and us not noticing, oblivious. No. When we live our life in the presence of the knowledge of death, we treat each moment as precious.

When we remember that nothing, no thing, can be sustained, that even the sun will eventually die, that makes everything, every moment, shine with life — every sunrise, every raindrop, every elm tree, every butterfly, every heartbeat. When we notice all that shining life, we are more fully alive and more fully present to this amazing world and to every other shining, living person around us. Which makes this statement by Irenaeus ring true, “The glory of God is a human-being fully alive!”

It is truly liberating and life-giving to enter Lent knowingly, willingly with our faces disfigured by the mark of death and begin our journey, making our steady way through a 40-day Lenten practice of turning our faces toward

that which is fully alive. We put into practice the knowledge that, though death is true, it's not the final truth — not today and not ever. And that's universal too — in Russia, Ukraine, and Tennessee.

As we turn our faces to look ahead to the great three days and remember again the promises of the resurrection, we journey with Christ toward Life (with a capital "L") — Life that remains even after death has made its grasping attempt to claim us and hold us.

In a few minutes we will confess to all the ways we turn our faces to what is death dealing, withholding our love, turning away from God's call to service, our pride, our self-indulgence, our neglect of God and others, our contempt of others, and our wastefulness, and we will ask God to restore us. Then we'll receive the mark of death on our heads and embrace our dying to all our death-dealing ways only to be enlivened again in the promise that death has been swallowed up in the victory of the glory of God — our Lord Jesus Christ fully alive.

