

Sermon for Ash Wednesday

The Rev. Brooks Cato

I can't help but notice that today is Valentine's Day. I actually thought about getting some of those little chalky candy hearts special made for y'all. Can you imagine? Instead of "Be mine" in cutesy pink letters they'd say "Remember that you are dust." Actually, this collision of special days isn't all that rare. This is the second time it's happened since I moved up here. The last time this happened, y'all, it was a bad day. I don't know if you remember this, but it's seared in my memory.

The last time Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day overlapped was 2018, and that dreadful February 14th was the day a heavily armed 19 year old walked into Parkland High School. (I also just heard that about an hour ago, gunmen opened fire on the Kansas City Superbowl parade. I haven't had the time to process that just yet, so I'm gonna stick with what I've got.) One of those killed in the Parkland shooting was an Episcopalian, the head of her youth group, and I will never forget the picture of her mother when she heard the terrible news of her daughter's death. Surrounded by other mothers holding her up, her face contorted in soul-bending grief, eyes closed, mouth open, sobbing to the heavens, and on her forehead, the telltale black smudge signaling a season of more absence than she'd ever imagined. It's a brutal photograph, but there's something about that ashen cross in the moment that heightens it all. She was told earlier in the day by a priest that loved her that she would die. I don't know if her daughter received the same message or bore the same cross, but I know the mother heard those words. And because she's human, I suspect she heard those words and took them to heart as heavy and solemn as any year. And I suspect she couldn't help but extend that same message to her own family. And then she and everyone else went about the rest of their day. Until the tragedy stormed in and the mark of liturgy became disturbingly real.

Over the past four years, even the past six months, we've experienced a series of losses, great in number and deep in feeling. Lord knows we all have, and many of those we've navigated together in this center of community. While these many losses have been terrible, I'm starting to think of them and us and all sorts of things differently. I don't know that I've completely crossed the threshold into a new way of seeing the world just yet, but I'm glimpsing something powerful. I think most years I've had a tendency to lean in hard to the tragedy, the loss, the imminence of death today. Start Lent off with the abrupt change of tone from the season of light we're leaving behind. We'll get to be happy again come Easter, but for now, there's forty days of heaviness to take on. That image of the mother in Parkland defines the season. Or, that's how I've been thinking about today and the season ahead. But I'm beginning to see something different in these forty days. I'm beginning to see life. The dead have their own concerns now, concerns I suspect are rather nice now that they live on streets of gold in mansions prepared by Christ himself. But we're still here. And we've got this life at hand.

There's something about Ash Wednesday and Lent that amplifies everything. In a short while, this priest that loves all y'all will tell you that one day, you will die. Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. I do this for many reasons. Jesus is coming back soon, so get your affairs in order. Tidy up your life before he shows up, get ready for the coronation that is Easter, that sort of thing. But I'm beginning to wonder if all this talk about death isn't really about death. I'm beginning to wonder if the focus of Lent is to find meaning to life and all the things it brings us. Life is a beautiful gift, albeit far too often a gift sullied by tragedy. But the tragedies, the losses, the knowledge that one day I will die, in a strange way, all that enriches my days.

A friend of mine who just turned eighty told me about a conversation he had with his granddaughter. She was teasing him about how old he was getting, and he just said, "I love being 80, not everyone gets the privilege." Maybe that octogenarian's onto something. This life we all still have, it is a fleeting thing. Maybe Lent gives us an opportunity to examine the ephemeral nature of life itself. It is fleeting. It is delicate. It is

impermanent and fragile as a single strand of gossamer bowed by the wind. The knowledge that we will die carries great influence over how we view life. Death tends to be something we fear or at least want to avoid. But I've been around a lot of death. I've been at bedsides for last breaths. I've closed eyes that won't stay shut. I've held bodies close. And there's something that happens in that place that is always sad and always beautiful. People stop. Death interrupts everything. Death does not care if you have a project at work or need to pop out to use the facilities. And when people stop, they take in their own existence with heightened sensitivity -- and usually we don't even know we're doing it. Our brains register smells and file them away to surprise us with memories a decade later. The song playing quietly on the radio in the background cements with the moment and always reminds us of that day. Tears and wailing hearts fill the air, and words between people matter less than hands on shoulders or that one friend that absolutely refuses to walk on eggshells.

I guess what I'm getting at is that today's reminder is frightening, but it's also deeply enriching if we let it be. The knowledge of our own fragility has enormous power. There are so many things I want to do in this world, and instead of that fragility being a reason not to do them, it becomes a reason to do them as soon and as fully as possible. Who knows, by this time next year, I may think of Lent as a completely different thing yet again, but at least this go-round, Lent's looking like an invitation to live more fully. Maybe our Lenten disciplines do the same thing. Maybe what we give up highlights what really matters. We have so much to gain knowing what comes for us all but refusing to fear it. We're moving into a season that's often very difficult, but maybe it doesn't have to be. Maybe all this purple and ash and reminders of death really remind us to live. Not everyone gets the privilege.

I think I've told y'all this before, but it bears retelling. Several years ago now, the Flower Guild's altar arrangements took on a different look for Lent. I asked them to gather up all the dead plant things they could find that grow around here naturally. I wanted that altar to honor the sacred beauty of death and loss through those arrangements, and those folks did an extraordinary job. Old milkweed husks, locust thorns, crispy grass, you get the idea. Well, one year they had some tree cuttings stuck in rocks up there, and my goodness did it look bare. Perfect, right? Death right there where we all could see a world desolate and deeply in need of new life. When we approached Palm Sunday, though, we discovered an amazing subtle change up there. I don't know if y'all could see it from the pews, but those of us that putter around up here certainly could. Those dead, neglected stems began to sprout. Tiny green bundles lined every stick, and by Palm Sunday, there were honest to God leaves on those things. We needed new life, and new life showed up just in time for Easter.

Maybe that's us this year. Maybe we're all feeling a little like cut up sticks or like the crusted remains of last year's blossoms. I do. Shoot, I'm doing good if I get out of bed. But maybe that's where we are this year, a tidal wave of unavoidable grief has hit this place. I don't think we need a reminder of death this year. I think we need a reminder to live. Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return, so get on with living now while you still have the privilege.