

Sermon – Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
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Grace Lutheran Church
Ash Wednesday – Year A
26 February 2020

“Honest to Goodness”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. I was reminded by Facebook the other day of a story I shared last year. I was driving to Grace on a school day but missed the turn at Augusta. When the kids pointed this out, I said, “I don’t know what happened; I must be getting old.” Without missing a beat, Torsten chimed in: “Dad, you’re not getting old. You *are* old.” His statement is a matter of perspective, to be sure. I remember when my father turned forty; it seemed like he was ancient. I crossed that mark several years ago, but I don’t feel old – except in my knees when I’m running. And no doubt that are some among the more mature here today thinking right now: “Old? You ain’t seen nothing yet, sonny boy.” There is nothing wrong with aging, of course, not that it matters. It’s going to happen anyway. As the British poet Henry Reed pointed out, “As we get older we do not get any younger.” Indeed. The reason we humans don’t much like to think about getting older is that every second we live is one second less that we’ll be alive – and that is true no matter how much time we have left. No one gets out alive. Roughly 100 billion people have lived on this earth and, except for an Enoch here and an Elijah there, they have all either died or are in the process of doing so. Even you. Even me.
2. I know; what a way to start a sermon! But today is an odd day – a day when we begin worship by confessing our sins and then come forward to be marked with ash: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

This is troubling but nevertheless true. Today, at the start of Lent, we speak and hear the truth. We are mortal, and we are sinful. We are not *becoming* these things; we *are* them. You are dust. To dust you shall return.

3. Of course, some here need no reminder. There are those who know death all too well. Many here sit, brokenhearted, yearning for the presence of loved ones whose lives now echo only with what one poet calls “the resonance of absence.” There are those who hear about aging and mourn for those who never had the chance, those for whom death came early. There are those for whom death is a current companion, which it will be for each of us someday. This is all simply true.
4. Today is a day to be honest about death, and as such it is a day to be honest about our sin. For if the wages of sin is death, something like the opposite is true. So does death fuel our sin. In our denial of death, we end up giving in to the ways of death. We find ourselves overrun with wars and rumors of war, as the people were in the days of the prophet Joel. In our desire to avoid suffering and death, we inflict it upon others, creating systems and structures of gross inequality, turning greed into a virtue. We even turn our religion into a means of self-aggrandizement, turning what few good things we do – giving alms, praying, fasting – into opportunities for virtue signaling. “Look,” we cry, “look how good we are!” In focusing on our own goodness, we end up turning further away from God and one another; away from real life, and into death.
5. But if the diagnosis is certain, so is the cure. We need what the psalmist cries out for – a heart transplant. With David we pray, “Create in me a clean heart.” We have put our hearts, our trust, in the wrong place. As long as we put our faith in ourselves, we are lost. But God, as it turns out, does not wish us to lose us. God does not desire the death of sinners. The God of Israel is the God who gives a new spirit to us; a God who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. And now this God has entered into our world of sin and death,

and through our sin, dies. Jesus preaches in this Sermon on the Mount that where our treasure is, there will our hearts be also. And then Jesus enacts this for us. Jesus treasures you, and me, and this whole world. Treasuring us, Jesus puts his heart where we are, into death itself. He does what we won't do. He lives truly for others, his beloved, with no regard for himself. And so, living out the divine plan, he is raised to show us that death is not the end. Not for him and, through him, not for this world.

6. We are dust, and to dust we shall return. But we are dust that belongs to Jesus, and in him we shall live. Your dusty lives have become cruciform, shaped by Jesus' death and resurrection. We hear Joel's call today, the trumpet of alarm that urges our return to the Lord. But we also know where the journey leads, to the cross and to the empty tomb on the other side of death. We are not there yet, but our knowledge of the destination gives us strength for the journey. Let the heart of Jesus break open your own heart. Give, and generously, not for the sake of your ego but because your neighbor needs your help. Pray, and pray fervently, not so that others think you faithful but because you know you need the One to whom you pray. Fast, not to demonstrate your fortitude, but because there is so much worth giving up – hatred and selfishness and division and inequality. Listen to Paul and replace these things with purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God. Let these practices mark your life and guide your way as you journey through Lent and beyond.
7. Today we are reminded that we will die, and there's no use avoiding it. But just there we see the good news we would otherwise miss, hear the gospel that is our hope and salvation. God's heart is with God's treasure. Jesus has died our death, and we shall live his life. Return to the Lord, your God, and discover the grace and mercy that promise new life beyond the power of death, the grace and mercy that make it possible to live a life pleasing to God

today. We don't know when death will come. But thanks be to God, we know what's on the other side of it. In this world of fake news and false promises, let this honest promise be enough for you. Though marred by sin and death, you are treasured in the very heart of God. In Christ, you are not *becoming* alive; you *are* alive. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, now and forever. Amen.