

Ash Wednesday, Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, 2/14/2023 (Elizabeth Felicetti)

Lent begins today: a somber forty-day season of preparation before the glories of Easter. Lent used to be a time when catechumens prepared for baptism at Easter. Lent is one of my favorite church seasons, as we direct our attention toward God, fasting from things that distract us while focusing on prayer and giving. The season begins in a challenging way, with Ash Wednesday, when we remember our death. *Memento mori*, as the Latin phrase goes. Remember we are dust, and to dust we shall return.

Remembering our deaths is a historical spiritual practice. Some saints have kept skulls on their desks for that very purpose. I have a rosary with little skull beads that I hang next to my desk at home. But honestly, contemplating my own death was not something I routinely did until my cancer diagnoses four years ago. I thought a lot more about everyone else's death—I have been achingly aware of the fragility of life since my mother died when I was six. But somehow this didn't translate to my own death, even though I thought it did.

Contemplating our deaths is a solid Anglican pastime. Jeremy Taylor, one of the so-called Caroline Divines—that is, church of England theologians during the time of the first and second King Charles, so, the 1600s. Taylor wrote a manual about holy dying. One line in his book is this: “As our life is short, so it is very miserable; and therefore it is well it is short.” That's not my theology at all, so I don't make a habit of reading Jeremy Taylor regularly, but I do believe that being aware of our mortality can enrich our lives.

As anyone who has experienced a serious illness knows, well-wishers try to make us see positive aspects of our brushes with illness. This frustrates me, and I implore you to resist this if you are not ill but a friend is. Despite not appreciating others trying to get me to look on the sunny side of cancer, I confess that I have enjoyed my life the past few years, and especially the past few months, more than most of the previous years.

I understand what is most important to me. I'm grateful to be able to continue in this church that I love, but I work far fewer hours. I do this mainly for health reasons as well as financial reasons for our church, but I am also happier than I have ever been, because I get to focus on the pieces I love, like leading worship, and engage in far fewer meetings.

I've also given many things away in the past year and am surprised by how happy that has made me feel. For example, I gave away an antique diamond ring I absolutely loved, with two round diamonds that looked to me like an owl's eyes. I inherited it years ago from my parents, who passed it along from a great aunt. I wore it every day. Then I received this ring after Gary's mom died. How many rings do I need? So I gave the beloved antique ring to my niece Betty, expecting that it would be hard to let it go—but instead, it brought me so much joy to pass that heirloom on to her.

Jesus talked against money and possessions more than anything else in the Bible. Money and possessions get in the way of our relationship with God.

Today's Gospel ends like this: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in

heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

I wish I had started to prioritize what’s most important in my life before I had a brush with death, but I’m grateful that I have a better sense of my priorities now than I did before I had cancer, and before my cancer reoccurred. I don’t have a very high chance of still being here in four years, but I hope I will be, because unlike Jeremy Taylor, I don’t find life miserable. Focusing on my death has helped me straighten my priorities, give away treasures, take risks, and chase joy.

Our readings today are a bit confusing, and Lent and Ash Wednesday can be a bit confusing. On the one hand, in Lent we are encouraged to look inward, to examine ourselves. But ultimately, we are to look outward, toward others and toward God.

We hear in our Gospel to beware of practicing our piety before others, and yet we are all getting ashes smudged on our foreheads that, unless we go directly home without seeing anyone else, will advertise to others that we’ve been to church today, Ash Wednesday. Our Gospel reading, however, does not mean that we should be putting our ashes on in the closet instead of together here in church. Instead, we are reminded that the three hallmarks of Lent that are mentioned in this reading—prayer, fasting, and giving—these three practices are about *God*, not about *us*. Yes, we remember our own death, but the point of that is to point toward God. So, if you fast from chocolate for Lent, for example, do it so that every time you crave chocolate you think about God, not because you are trying to lose five pounds. Don’t pick a Lenten discipline to better yourself or to do a second try of a failed New Year’s resolution: try to become closer to God. Examine what gets in the way.

Remembering where we came from and where we are going—that is, from dust and to dust—can help us.