

Sermon for Ash Wednesday, February 14, 2024

Today is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. This is the day when we talk about our two favourite subjects, sin and death. Well, actually, we tend to avoid these subjects like the plague. One of my colleagues recently told me that a parishioner said to her that if she ever talked about sin, or even mentioned the word “sin,” she would take her child out of Sunday School and leave the church. And of course, death is another word we avoid. We say, “passed.” And yet, these are both realities of our lives. Realities we are not entirely comfortable with, usually.

On Ash Wednesday, we are reminded that we are dust and to dust we shall return. Ashes to ashes and dust to dust. And if we allow ourselves to actually contemplate this, contemplate our own deaths, and come to terms with that, it can actually have a wonderful, liberating effect on our lives, oddly enough. Coming to terms with our death means accepting our limitations. We are not God and we will not live forever on this earth. We have only a limited time here and a limited capacity to do things. This helps us figure out our priorities a little better. It lets us off the hook for doing everything. What do we want to do with that time that we have? How do we want to spend it? There’s a freedom in realising that we can’t do everything which helps us choose the most important things to do.

One way of thinking about it is to say that our lives are one long preparation for our deaths. You might think that’s depressing, but in another way, it’s not the least bit depressing. If we have only a limited (and unknown) amount of time, then we want to do the important things first. And by the way, what are the important things? If we are going to meet our Maker after our lives are over, how can we best prepare for this? How can we be ready to meet our Maker?

I was at a retreat once when we did a meditation on our own deaths. The leader started out by saying, “Imagine you know you have one year left to live. What do you do?” And we were to imagine what we would do, what we would say to our loved ones. What would be on our bucket list if we only had one year left? And then he dropped it down to one month. What would we do with that month? Or one week? Or one day? If we knew today is our last day on earth, what do we do with it? It was an interesting exercise. And I realised that a lot of the stuff I filled my day with didn’t matter that much, and a lot of the things I put off did matter. I also came to terms with the reality that any year could be my last. Any day could be my last. So how do I want to live? Live most fully in the time I have? In tune with my own deepest values? So I am ready to meet God when the time comes?

Well, getting ready to meet God brings us to the other topic: sin. I will invite you in a few minutes to keep a holy Lent, by self-examination, penitence, prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and by reading and meditating on the Word of God. Self-examination sometimes leads us to penitence. That is, when we look at our lives honestly, we are likely to find some things that we are doing that we probably shouldn’t be doing, and some things we aren’t doing, which we probably should be doing. Otherwise known as some sins. We might wish we spent more time with God in prayer, Bible study, almsgiving and so on. Or maybe more time with loved ones.

But how do we go about honest self-examination? I find that people often go to one of two extremes. Either they deny that they sin at all or they beat themselves up. There is an idea in our society right now that we should only think positive thoughts, and only say positive things to kids, for example, and if we ever suggest that someone has done something less than perfect, we will somehow be warping their personalities. Or our own. I agree that we shouldn't be constantly finding fault and never mentioning a person's good qualities. But to pretend that we're all perfect is actually just not true. We are not all perfect. We do all make mistakes, we do all do things we shouldn't do and fail to do things we should do. In short, we do all sin. And pretending to ourselves that we don't, actually means closing our hearts and minds to improvement, to growth. It means not letting the voice of the Spirit show us how we could do better. That's a path to avoid.

Equally damaging is the idea that we are horrible, miserable, worthless sorry excuses for a human being. Beating ourselves up. That is almost a form of inverted pride or false humility. If I'm going to admit I'm a sinner, I will go whole hog and say I'm the worst sinner ever. Or at least that there's nothing really good in me. And you know, that's no more true than the other one. We are neither perfect nor perfectly bad. When we beat ourselves up like that, we are actually closing the door to God's forgiveness and mercy, clinging to our imperfections. We start to think we're so bad God could never forgive us. We don't forgive ourselves. And when we find it hard to accept the forgiveness God freely offers we don't let go of our imperfections and move on. Both these extremes should be avoided.

When we come to terms with our limitations, by accepting that we will one day die, it makes it easier for us to come to terms with our limitations by accepting that we sometimes sin. And in accepting that as a fact, it frees us to get on with our lives as best we can and to turn to God for help when we don't do our best, without getting our socks in a knot about it. Because it's no surprise to God that we are imperfect human beings.

I worked for a couple years as a reporter on the Shelburne CoastGuard Newspaper. Every Wednesday, I went off to provincial court to see what was going on there. Then I would come back and write a story or two for our weekly paper. I learned a few things about our criminal justice system. One of the pillars of our justice system is that the accused must have a fair trial. And part of a fair trial is an unbiased judge. If the judge knew the defendant or the accuser, or if the judge had already formed an opinion about the case, then they had to recuse themselves. That is, they had to step back from presiding at the trial. Another judge had to hear the case. The judge had to be completely unbiased and impartial and get at the truth. And this is a good thing in our criminal justice system.

But our final judge, who is God, is not unbiased or impartial. Our Judge is completely partial. Our Judge knows us through and through and loves us more than we can even begin to imagine. Our Judge loves us so much he was willing to come and live among us, subject to our limitations and even die for us. Our Judge is totally biased. Biased in our favour. Not blind to our faults, but wanting to forgive them, give us another chance, help us get past them. The Old Testament readings today say that the Lord is gracious and merciful, abounding in steadfast love. And he will pardon us. That message is a theme throughout the

Old and New Testaments. God is a forgiving, merciful, loving God. He understands our limitations. He remembers we are dust. He loves us anyway.

So during Lent, we are encouraged to bring ourselves before this loving, biased, Judge. We are encouraged to take stock of ourselves with God's help. What are we doing well? What are we doing badly? What are we neglecting to do at all? Where is there some room for growth? We are encouraged to look at ourselves honestly, and to bring what we find to God, for God's judgement and forgiveness and help and transformation.

If we find something that we realise is not right – ie a sin – we will likely feel sad about that – that's penitence. We can offer the sin and the sadness to God, for God's forgiveness and healing. If we find things that are good, we can offer them to God, too, for God to use and develop further. Repenting of our sins just means recognising that they are not good and changing our ways, with help from God. Just as we might recognise we took a wrong turn and turn around and go the right way instead.

Lent is a time for us to particularly examine ourselves and take stock and invite God, our loving, forgiving, gracious God, to help us in that process. And to offer what we find to God and to ask for God's help in growing into the full stature of Christ, to being more like him. We do not need to be afraid. We do not have to come trembling before our stern Judge. It's more like coming before our favourite, loving, wise grandparent for some help with life's problems. They may point out to us the error of our ways, or give us a piece of their mind, but they'll do it lovingly, as God does.

When we do this, there is rejoicing in Heaven. And Lent is a time for this. That's what it's all about. I invite you all to draw closer to God this Lent and bring joy to the heart of our Judge and Redeemer.