

Ash Wednesday, 2020 Death and Grieving

Martin Luther, our forebear in faith, wrote the following line in one of his less cheerful moments: “Even as we live each day, death our life embraces.” These words have taken on new meaning for me lately. “Even as we live each day, death our life embraces.” I would think these words may resonate more intensely for most of us around now, in fact, as our congregation and community have experienced so many deaths the past year or two. Whereas some years in the preceding year or two we might have had 5 or 6 funerals, we’ve had well over a dozen, many of them dear and active church and community participants. At times, I’ve found myself feeling weary and depleted from the grief within me and around me, and I would imagine that would be also true for many here tonight. Some of these deaths could hardly be called surprising; Dorothy Peterson, for example, was nearly 101 years old. But Nick Ojard’s accidental death shortly before Christmas stunned us, as he was in his early 30s. And even John Safstrom, our most recent congregational member to die, though he was nearly 87, was so full of life and vigor that we find ourselves not only saddened by his death, but shocked. Of course, we’ve all also lost people in the past year or two who aren’t members here, and so that individual list of those we grieve can grow long, and the weight of sorrow we feel can most certainly grow heavy. Add in what seemed like about a month of one gray day after another earlier this winter, and life can seem way harder than it should be. I’m certainly hoping that we’re done with death for a time, but I do have to wonder how realistic a hope that is when we live in an aging society. Martin’s words ring true: “Even as we live each day, death our life embraces.”

Typically, as people of faith, we focus on life rather than death, and rightly so. We often reflect on the signs of life all around us---the inevitable coming of spring each year, the dawn that always follows each night, the birth of each new child, the butterflies that emerge from the cocoon, and so forth. It is true that signs of life surround us, and I, for one, am all for focusing on them. But, it is equally true that signs of death surround us, too---the

inevitable coming of winter each year, the night that finishes off each day, the inevitable decay of living things, and of course, death itself. At times, death seems to move among us as a malicious and unpredictable presence. Death is a certainty, but it is a frightening certainty, and one that most of us would prefer to deny.

While denying death may be our preference, reality doesn't allow us that luxury. Nor does our faith. Death is a part of our lives, and accordingly, our faith acknowledges it. Faith is not about denial of harsh realities, but about finding a way to face them with courage and hope. Our service this evening and the season of Lent which it begins are about facing death. That's not *all* they're about, but it's a significant theme. That makes this service a challenging service for many; it's no coincidence that some choose not to attend because of the stark nature of the service content. We acknowledged our mortality already this evening, in the making of the sign of the cross on our foreheads and the pronouncement of what could be heard as our death sentence: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." That's our *own* inevitable death that we have acknowledged tonight. The next 40 days of Lent will lead us towards *another* death: Christ's crucifixion on the cross. Moving through the season of Lent towards Good Friday is a little like watching the movie Titanic---you know it's not going to end well. The difference between the Titanic movie and Lent, is that Good Friday is followed by Easter, the surprise joyful ending. But we do well not to rush so hastily towards the victory of Easter and to instead spend a little time learning the lessons of Lent. Among those lessons: death is a hard reality which we must face; but as people of faith, we do not face it with hopeless despair, *and* we do not face it alone. We grieve death, most certainly; but we see it as a gateway to the real adventure of a life *beyond* this life. Lent, therefore, is a serious season but not a grim season. It is an honest season, that allows us to be human, to be broken, and to grieve. And at a time in the life of our church and community when there has been so much death, it is wise to acknowledge that where there is death, there must also be grief. We're going to briefly reflect upon death and grief for a few moments, because they

have been such frequent companions as late. And that grief has an *impact* on us individually and as a community.

I mentioned that there are different kinds of deaths-- those that are expected, those that shock us. As even as death comes differently, so does grief. In my experience, grief cannot be controlled or managed, but it rather a journey, a process, that requires patience, tenderness, and resilience. Grief isn't just a single emotion, either, it's not that simple. Sadness is probably the predominant feeling that many of us have while grieving. And the sadness can be triggered by something as reasonable as observing a date that's significant like an anniversary or a holiday, or it may be triggered by something as haphazard and random as a song that just happens to be playing on the radio. I remember sobbing in the Mother's Day card aisle at Target a few years back when I saw the card I might have given to my Mom, but couldn't. Waves of sadness are not at all uncommon. But there's a rich mixture of emotions present in grief *beyond* sadness. Anger can be present---with God, or at the one who has died, or with the medical profession, or even at the person taking too long in the line in front of us at the grocery store. Because we can just find ourselves angry and irritable in general and may not understand why. Fatigue is often another expression of grief, not only because we may not sleep well, but because grief is such hard work, far more than we usually acknowledge. Furthermore, grief can be alienating. We may feel alienated from ourselves and experience *ourselves* as a stranger---we don't recognize our self in the wild jumble of sadness, anger, weariness that we are being. We may experience *the world* as a stranger-- everything seems off somehow, perilous, stress inducing, hostile. We may experience *God* as a stranger--our faith may feel as fragile as the life of the one we lost. All of this is completely natural for us personally , and likely is also experienced at some levels *corporately*. Communities that have borne heavy losses can take on characteristics of grief together , as people try to make sense of what has happened and find a way to move forward. I think that frightened, hostile, or angry *groups* of people are often really *grieving* groups of people who may not realize the dynamic that lies beneath their simmering emotion.

If all of this is true, it serves us well to understand a little more about how grief impacts us and others. We can acknowledge that grief is hard work and gets expressed in all different ways, but we also want to acknowledge that some of the ways grief is expressed are likely more healing and helpful than others. I'm wondering if as a community that has experienced a good deal of death and grief in the last bit of time, we may want to be especially sensitive to the impact that has on us, individually and corporately. I absolutely believe that it is especially important when we grieve to be patient and kind to ourselves; likewise, it may be especially important when we are within a community that has experienced significant death and grieving, to be patient and kind to those around us. To give each other the benefit of the doubt. To find the compassionate response within us, rather than the impatient response. So that grief can be borne together with hope and kindness, rather than become a draining, negative dynamic amongst us all.

I know this all sounds heavy duty, and it is. Yet, here's the thing---it's actually so much better to have an opportunity to grieve, and to do it among a loving and faithful community, than to not have that opportunity or community. I was reminded of this the other day after visiting with my brother's wife, Helen. Helen had a brother who estranged himself from his family and moved away with just his wife to an unknown location. He didn't keep in touch with Helen, her other siblings, or even his young adult son. He died about a year ago, suddenly, in his 50s. His wife maintained enough contact with other family members for them to know that he had died. But that was the extent of their knowledge. There was no service for him. No opportunity to look at old pictures, share stories of better family times, no chance to try and understand what had happened within his life or his dying. And that makes for a grieving process that doesn't really get to happen in any significantly comforting way. Hard though it is for us to gather to grieve those we love who have died, how much better it is to do so than to *not* do so. The strength and consolation that comes from a ritual like a funeral, where sacred songs and scriptures and rites are observed is so significant, and when we don't have that opportunity, it makes death and grief that much harder. Tonight, as we

acknowledge our mortality, our inevitable death and the grief that will accompany that, we do it *together*. *All* of us are dust. *All* of us return to dust. It's true. But it's a truth we face together, as a community of faith that doesn't deny death, but can face it with courage and hope. Because we know that at the end of Lent, *there is* Easter. *There is* resurrection. *There is* hope. Always. And nothing can take that away from us.

Remember Martin's words? "Even as we live each day, Death our life embraces." He goes on, "Who is there to bring us help, Rich, forgiving graces? You only, Lord, you only! Everlasting God, By grace bring us safely through the flood of bitter death. Lord, have mercy." It is true that death is real, but the grace of God is *even more* real. It is true that grief is hard work, but the strength of God is *greater* than the burden of grief. Because of Christ's death on the cross, we are the blest recipients of God's rich, forgiving graces, which means we grieve, but not without hope, and not alone. Not only do we have each other's back, but God is powerfully present with us; behind, in front of, and beside us all. Nothing can take that away from us. Amen.