

**Homily – Where Will You Be Buried (Ash Wednesday)****Rev. Rob Keim****February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2024 – St. Barnabas Episcopal Church**

Twenty-first century Americans are notorious for ignoring and hiding from death. We don't want to be reminded of it. We don't want to see it. We pretend that it doesn't happen.

But there is a lot of wisdom in the adage that says “when one overcomes the fear of death, then one starts to live.”

Five hundred years ago, Saint John of the Cross reminds us of this in his poem “I Live Yet Do Not Live in Me.”

I live yet do not live in me,  
am waiting as my life goes by,  
and die because I do not die.  
No longer do I live in me,  
and without God I cannot live;  
to him or me I cannot give  
my self, so what can living be?  
A thousand deaths my agony  
waiting as my life goes by,  
dying because I do not die.  
This life I live alone I view  
as robbery of life, and so  
it is a constant death — with no  
way out until I live with you.  
God, hear me, what I say is true:  
I do not want this life of mine,  
and die because I do not die.  
Being so removed from you I say  
what kind of life can I have here  
but death so ugly and severe  
and worse than any form of pain?  
I pity me — and yet my fate  
is that I must keep up this lie,  
and die because I do not die.  
The fish taken out of the sea  
is not without a consolation:  
his dying is of brief duration  
and ultimately brings relief.  
Yet what convulsive death can be  
as bad as my pathetic life?

The more I live the more I die.  
When I begin to feel relief  
on seeing you in the sacrament,  
I sink in deeper discontent,  
deprived of your sweet company.  
Now everything compels my grief:  
I want — yet can't — see you nearby,  
and die because I do not die.  
Although I find my pleasure, Sir,  
in hope of someday seeing you,  
I see that I can lose you too,  
which makes my pain doubly severe,  
and so I live in darkest fear,  
and hope, wait as life goes by,  
dying because I do not die.  
Deliver me from death, my God,  
and give me life; now you have wound  
a rope about me; harshly bound  
I ask you to release the cord.  
See how I die to see you, Lord,  
and I am shattered where I lie,  
dying because I do not die.  
My death will trigger tears in me,  
and I shall mourn my life: a day  
annihilated by the way  
I fail and sin relentlessly.  
O Father God, when will it be  
that I can say without a lie:  
I live because I do not die?

One of the privileges that we have in our church is that we celebrate both life and death. We know that life and death are wound up in each other and they profoundly impact one another.

Now, on Good Friday we remember and celebrate the death of Jesus on the Cross. We celebrate his death, but we also know he will rise again.

On All Saints Sunday in November we remember and celebrate all those that have gone on before us. We know they have died to this life, but we also trust and believe and know that they have or will have new life in ways that we can scarcely understand.

And finally, each year on Ash Wednesday we remember our own mortality. We do that very unusual thing of pointing to our own death.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Each and every one of us will go to the grave. And, our bodies will fade into dust. And, all memory of us will eventually disappear as well. As St. John of the Cross wrote in his poem, celebrating our temporariness will free us from the sting of death.

One spiritual exercise that I encourage is that a person should plan their own memorial or funeral. Even a younger, healthy person can benefit from this spiritual exercise, for as we grapple with own death, we start to live in new and wonderful ways. I have files in my office in which ten of you have already planned by memorial, but what about the rest of you?

Now, if I was to pause my sermon and lead you all through an exercise in planning your own memorial, then how many of you would flee for the door? Planning one's own memorial is an important spiritual exercise, but many of us are not ready to do this, for it would make our death seem a little too real, a little too imminent. But on Ash Wednesday, as we remember our own mortality, we should not shrink away from the tough stuff. However, planning your memorial is more than we want to do today. But, let me ask you one question.

Where do you want to be buried? Or, where do you want your ashes to go?

This one question is much simpler than planning a memorial, but it is still an interesting Ash Wednesday spiritual exercise, for it still causes us to acknowledge our own death.

Where do you want to be buried? Or, where do you want your ashes to go?

Thirty years ago, when my parents were still in their fifties, they bought two plots in their church's cemetery. The church I grew up in, has a very large cemetery surrounding it, and my parents made plans. They bought two plots, and several long-time friends also bought plots nearby.

I should point out that ten years ago, my mother noticed that someone had been buried in their plot. Somehow the records and my parent's recollection were different. Or maybe something got screwed up in the cemetery. Be that as it may, my parents had to get used to the idea that their bodies or ashes would be buried a few plots over next to people that were different than they had originally expected.

Now, one thing that my parents have started to recognize is that my siblings and I don't get back to Pittsburgh very regularly. So, their graveside may not get visited very often. Also, the cemetery has many friends but does not have other family members. And, sometimes my dad, a veteran of the Marine Corp., dreamed of being buried in a military cemetery. My mother put the kibosh on that since she would not be allowed to be buried in the military cemetery. My mother insists that she will be buried next to her husband. So four years ago when my dad died, my mother sold the plots at the cemetery in Pittsburgh and bought a plot near the family farm in upstate New York. Other family members are there and we all are more likely to visit those graves.

And here is a twist. These days many people are having their ashes spread without a marker or memorial plot. And, often the ashes are divided and put into several locations. Some of you may have already decided this is what you are going to do.

So, again my question to you today is where do you want to be buried? Or, where do you want your ashes to go?

Grappling with this silly little question is a good spiritual exercise that helps us remember and plan for our own mortality. The more we can accept death, the more we will live into the way that God has created us to be. Plus, we are assured and trust that we go on after death. Like those that have gone on before us, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus assure us that we have the hope of a new life in ways that we can scarcely understand.

So, remember that you are dust, the substance of the stars, animated with the Breath of Life. Uniquely formed in the image and likeness of Divine Love. Authored in hope, forged in joyed, very good of very good, no accident we, this beloved quickened dust, knit to love and be loved. Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.