



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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ASH WEDNESDAY

FEBRUARY 26, 2020

ISAIAH 58:1-12; PSALM 103:8-14; 2 CORINTHIANS 5:20-6:10; MATTHEW 6:1-6,16-21

DECODING THE PARADOX OF ASH WEDNESDAY

Matthew 6:1-6,16-21 *[Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. "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."]*

One morning in the hospice home several years ago, while I was making my rounds, I entered her room to find her sound asleep. Francis was elderly, had quit eating, and lay dying, slowly, but with symptoms managed.

She had no family to be with her, and the hospice volunteers had not yet arrived to sit

with her. It was just the nurse with me there. I gently touched Francis' shoulder and called her name, but she did not rouse, so I took out my stethoscope, leaned over the bedside rail to listen to her heart and lungs on top of her gown.

This prompted her to open her eyes, from deep sleep or deep prayer, I was never sure, but she took one look at my face close to hers, and asked, “Is this heaven?” I chuckled and said, “No, Francis, I expect it will be much more beautiful than this...”

She would die a peaceful death a few days later, but I recount this story of Francis from time to time, and do so again today, because she did not fear her mortality, nor did she seek to short-circuit it. Hers was a remarkable faith, releasing any need to deny that death was a part of life.

Contrast that to an article I read this week from a past issue of the New Yorker. The piece was entitled “Silicon Valley’s Quest to Live Forever,” and details a burgeoning new sector of the economy, a multi-billion-dollar enterprise, funded by venture capitalists who seek to make death optional, or at least make death wait for decades beyond our current life span.ⁱ

The founder of a major tech company, whose mother died when he was in college, said: “Death has never made any sense to me. How can a person be there and then just vanish?” Another said that if aging is encoded in our DNA, then the code can be cracked. It’s just a matter of time. The actual science suggests it’s more complicated than that, but the impetus is clear—there is an effort to defy death, and they are looking to science to accomplish the task.

To be sure, there is a great deal of sound science behind gerontological research, and

genetic medicine is revolutionizing the way we think about diseases. But statistically, if we cured all cancer, we would add just 3.3 years to the median length of life. If we cured all heart disease, we’d add just four years. Not inconsequential, and very important to any who are affected by these diseases individually, but not a path to live to 200, as some suggest may become the new horizon.ⁱⁱ

There are ethical questions in all of this, of course. In the last century we added 30 years to the average life span of an American, additional years derived mainly from three things—clean drinking water, antibiotics, and immunizations. All good things. But then we saw a marked rise in prevalence of diseases like Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s, and debilitating arthritis that were relatively rare before.

The Greek myth of Tithonus cautions us against wishing for godlike powers. This prince of Troy fell in love with Eos, goddess of the dawn, who beckoned Zeus to grant Tithonus immortality, thereby ensuring their everlasting love. Only she failed to request eternal youth for him as well, and his immortal experience was one of decrepitude and senility. Homer described the plight of Tithonus this way:

*...loathsome old age pressed full upon him,
and he could not move nor lift his limbs,
...[confined to a room] he babbles endlessly,
and no more has strength at all, such as
once he had in his supple limbs.ⁱⁱⁱ*

The myth ends with Tithonus turning into a cicada whose haunting song is really a mournful cry for death to come.

It is a cautionary tale to all who believe that death is the thing to be avoided. Be careful what you ask for. It is also a reminder that people in all times have sought ways to fend off death. It is a natural enough impulse to consider it.

But beyond the science of aging, which as I said has much benefit to offer us, beyond the reasoned directives of healthy diet, exercise, and balanced lifestyle, beyond talk of breaking the code or ingesting God pills or slurping stem cells into your bloodstream in voracious hunger to add years to one's life, the question remains: Is there any meaning to be had in the experience of death, and without that experience, is life somehow deprived of its full meaning?

This question plumbs a deeper vein than science alone can mine, an existential one, and it is here, with the layers of fear and desire and control pulled back, and mindful of the stark reality that we will all die, it is here that we see life as something more than strings of nucleic acids in our cells to be manipulated. It is here that we ford a metaphysical stream to glean divine wisdom which was infused into the cosmos. It is here that we discover the pure paradox of Ash Wednesday.

Yes, we receive marks on our foreheads in ritualized fashion today to be reminded, while we are alive, that we are dust, and to

dust we shall return, and that the whole of life is wisely framed by this mortal reality.

We speak of sin today with special intention, to be reminded that we fall short of perfection in so many ways, breaching the bonds of life-giving goodness, stifling life as God intended, and we are called to repent—that is, to turn and do it differently, and in doing so, live more fully into the life God has offered us as a gift, so that when we die, we will have more fully lived.

We speak today of our Lenten practices of prayer and fasting and almsgiving, of a piety worthy of Christ whom we claim to follow to the cross, because we trust that through those practices we might discover anew all the blessings of this life, here and now, and share them with intention.

We do all this today, on Ash Wednesday, because we know, as people of faith, that in order to really live, one must die to all the ways we fool ourselves into believing we have it all figured out. That we have cracked the code.

We rest in the paradox today, that death is a part of life, and to live fully we must lean into the reality of death, and be willing to die into the fullness of life.

Which is why we do not end with the imposition of ashes, but after that, and after confessing our sins and repenting, we receive absolution, and then we approach the Table to share a holy meal in which we trust God nourishes us with the bread of life,

broken for us. And we come full circle to be
sent into the world, our souls and bodies,
dusted with the ashy truth of paradoxical

wisdom, which the world so desperately
needs.

ⁱ <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/04/03/silicon-valleys-quest-to-live-forever>

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tithonus>

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