

Ash Wednesday is a day we can talk about two important truths.

The first truth is marked in the shape of a cross on each of our foreheads as the words are spoken, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” That ashen cross is marked, and those words are spoken for *all* who come forward, from the youngest to the oldest. And the truth behind that gritty mark and those powerful words is that we will all die. That is a reality for which there are no exceptions. And death does not wait for a time we deem right, a place we would call appropriate. Death comes, and it comes for us all—when we’re ready, and all too often, when we are not.

And this one thing which we will all experience, this one thing to which we are all exposed, this one shared and communal reality is the one thing we don’t talk about. We speak in euphemism, describing the newly dead as those who have passed on, been called away, journeyed to a farther shore—as if death is just a really long trip with bad connections. We don’t talk about it as if, somehow, not talking will keep death from happening. As if, somehow, not talking will give us some control over death. As if, by not talking, death will shine its spotlight somewhere away from us and those we care about.

We don’t talk about death, and because we don’t talk about death, it’s harder for us to talk about the hope we have in the face of death. It used to be that Christians were better prepared to face death, and better able to articulate the promise that we know in Jesus Christ—the promise that death has been defeated and the truth that we stand on the other side of that victory. In particular, Christians used to have some very specific resources. I had the opportunity to attend a workshop last fall where teacher and theologian Thomas Long talked about the *Ars*

Moriendi. The *Ars Moriendi*, Latin for the Art of Dying, are dialogues from the 15th century that could be practiced and that portrayed conversations between faithful Christians and Satan:

Satan: You're frightened, aren't you?

Dying Person: Yes, I am frightened, but I am trusting my Savior who calms my fears.

Satan: Oh really? You think you are going to be rewarded by this Jesus, don't you? You who have no righteousness.

Dying person: Christ is my righteousness.

Satan: Oh ho, Christ is your righteousness? You think Christ will welcome you to the company of Peter and Paul and the apostles? You who have sinned over and over again?

Dying person: No, I am not going into the company of Peter and Paul. I am going into the company of the thief on the cross, who heard the promise, "Today, you will be with me in paradise."

Satan: Why are you so confident? You who have done nothing good.

Dying person: I have God's forgiveness and mercy.

Satan: Legions of demons are salivating, waiting for your soul.

Dying person: And I would be hopeless and fearful before that, if the Lord had not already crushed your tyranny.

Satan: Your God is unjust! What kind of God would bring someone like you into a kingdom of righteousness?

Dying person: God keeps promises. That is what justice is, and I will call on his mercy.

This dialogue speaks the other truth we lift up on Ash Wednesday. That in our baptism, we each have already died the only death that matters. The drowning death that joins us forever to the saving death of Jesus Christ. In his death he destroyed death for all of us, for all of time. And in his life he brought to each of us new life, for today and for all of time. We have been made right in Jesus Christ and because we have that we have forever the forgiveness and mercy that God gives us.

In the *Ars Moriendi* dialogues, fears are put into the mouth of Satan and responses of hope and assurance are voiced by the faithful Christian. We don't practice the *Ars Moriendi* dialogues anymore, but we can still talk faithfully to one another about death, about what we fear about death and about the hope that we have that lifts us beyond those fears.

And having practiced these words, when the time comes that we need to use them—for ourselves or for others, they are readily on our lips. Because we know now, and will know then, that we have been made righteous, not on our own account or by our own power, but because of the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Because we know now, and will know then, that we are in powerful company—not that of the famous and celebrated—but that of the thief and the tax collector and the prostitute—of all those who have been lifted up by the reaching down of Jesus Christ. Because we know now and will know then that the water of our baptism has washed away the sting of death, washed away the grime of our brokenness, washed away the stain of the world's despair and hopelessness.

Now I had a story of baptismal promise that another preacher told having read it from still another preacher's book. But that third-hand story will not do for today, because the righteousness of Jesus Christ is alive and well in the midst of *this* community. This community where we have a life and death struggle happening down at Blank Hospital, and this community

where a life well-lived is in her final days out in Altoona. Yesterday I visited Idelles and Gene Johnson in the care facility in Altoona where Idelles has been living through the last stages of Alzheimers. Yesterday I also talked to Chris Allen. As Gene and I visited he asked after Bradley, asked about the benefit and the t-shirts and shared that he is keeping Bradley and his family in his prayers. As I talked to Chris, he told me that even as they pray for Bradley, they also pray for all the other children up on the pediatric floor and would gladly pray for Idelles as well. One member of our community too young to have to deal with the kinds of things he has had to deal with and one member of our community long-struggling with a difficult and challenging illness, and yet, each reaching out to touch the lives of the other in their trust and confidence that the devil is defeated, that God's righteousness is theirs and that God's promise is true.

Their lives and their struggles touch us all, and we work to understand why they have to go through what they are going through, and even as we do, we each of us have a story to tell of God's promise and presence in their lives. I poured that water myself over Bradley's head and marked that watery cross. And Rod, my husband, watched as Idelles sang "This Little Light of Mine" along with the praise band even as her other memories slipped away in the grip of Alzheimer's. We share our stories of God's presence and promise, and our words help us to live that assurance with confidence and trust when the days get difficult and hope seems in short supply.

Satan: Your God is unjust! What kind of God would bring someone like you into a kingdom of righteousness?

Dying person: God keeps God's promises. That is what justice is, and I will call on his mercy, we will *all* call on his mercy.