

Ash Wednesday, February 10, 2016
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10

Yet

Yet. Such a small word, yet so important. In tonight's reading from second Corinthians, the writer of the letter, Paul, sets up a series of contrasts, all of which depend on this very small but very important word, "yet." Paul says that those follow Christ are treated as imposters, and yet are true. They are treated as unknown, and yet are well known. As punished, and yet not killed.

I once heard this reading as one of the selections at a friend's ordination service—that's the service in which a person publically, liturgically, in the context of a worship service, becomes a pastor. An ordination service is much like a typical worship service, there are Bible readings and a sermon, but there's also a special rite, a public announcement and acknowledgement by the person of what they will be, then hands are laid upon them. Well at this ordination service, one of the readings selected was this one we just heard from second Corinthians, with its "yet" contrasts at the end. Before we even get to that part, you have to admit that this reading is an interesting choice for an ordination service, what with all the promised afflictions for followers of Christ: "hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger." But if that weren't enough, when it came to the list of contrasts at the end, the ones depending on the "yet," the person doing the reading got a little discombobulated, and so rearranged the word order. Instead of saying "as punished, and yet not killed," the reader said "as punished, and not killed ... yet." There was a nervous chuckle in the congregation after that. "Not killed, yet." It reminds me of that line from Monty Python, and the Holy Grail, "I'm not dead, yet..."

Yet. Such a small word, yet so important—important even in its placement in a sentence! Yet. On it hangs the difference between being imposters and true, being unknown and known, being punished and killed. On it hangs the difference between being alive amidst adversity and, a much more cynical take, being not dead, yet.

Of course, it's not really fair to call such an observation cynical—it's realistic. One day, every one of us will die. We could in all accuracy reverse that word order, as that reader did. We're all not dead, yet—but death is inevitable. It's one of the certain things in life, along with... you know the saying: that are only two things certain in life: death and taxes.

Tax Day is not so far into the future, April 15. Before that, today, February 10. Ash Wednesday. As Wednesday and its public announcement, in the middle of a worship service, with hands laid on our heads, tracing and naming what we are: Remember you are dust. Remember you will die.

Ash Wednesday is about that, and yet more than that. This day, this worship service with its Bible readings and sermon and then this special rite, it's about more than just admitting the eventuality of death—real as that is. This day is not just about the death that will come, it's about the death that already is. It's about sin. Ash Wednesday invites us to acknowledge that not only will we die, but that we were already dead, we were dead in our trespasses, we were dead in our sin.

We do this, on this day, publically, liturgically. We all make this announcement, together, in the invitation to Lent, in the confession of sin. It's a rite that says—not cynically,

but, realistically, that we live in, and are part of, we are deeply implicated in a sin-filled world. We invest in it, we add to it. In the confession we acknowledge that "unfaithfulness, pride, envy, hypocrisy, and apathy have infected our lives." Who hasn't taken offense, for no reason but one's own ego? Who hasn't felt that secret, sour stab of jealousy? In the confession we acknowledge "our self-indulgent appetites and ways." Who doesn't cut themselves moral breaks, make excuses that are ethically dubious? In the confession we acknowledge our "exploitation of other people, our neglect of human suffering, our waste and pollution." Our world. Our city. Our neighborhood. The trash on the sidewalk. The people on the sidewalk that we treat as trash. Today, in worship, we stand together, we followers of Christ, and publically acknowledge all the ways we fail.

We sin. We were dead in our sin. But "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." That's scripture, too: "But God shows his great love for us in this, that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Here, today, hands are laid on us, and our heads are touched and traced with ash—but that ash is traced in the shape of a cross. For, as Paul writes, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." What an announcement! That is what that ashy cross also announces, now, that is what we are, this is what we have been made to be: "the righteousness of God." That ashy cross is not just about us, it is for us. God is for us.

God says to us, today, we are not yet alive. We were not alive, yet, but God so loved us, that he took on our mortal frame, and died, and rose—rose like flame, rose like the smoke that leaves only ashes behind, rose that we might really live. Forever. Starting today, "as sorrowful—yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything."