

March 1, 2017 – Ash Wednesday
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Psalm 51

Crosses On Our Brows

It was a little over a month ago that one of our long time members, Gordon Johnson, died. It felt sudden—even though Gordon’s health had not been good for a long time. His failing health in some ways made it a little less hard—but in other ways made it harder, because Gordon had been such an active part of this congregation for so long, his whole life long. Even longer than that, if you read the email notice that I sent out about his death. In that too-hastily put together notice, if you read carefully you saw that I listed Gordon’s baptism—a baptism held right here at this church—but in the notice I listed Gordon’s baptism as occurring a year before his birth.

With that kind of lifelong—and more—connection to this church, Gordon was here through several pastorates, and several of this church’s previous ministers came to his funeral and the lunch afterwards. I talked with one of them, Pastor Ross Larson, shared a story that another long-time member told me of the positive impression Pastor Larson made on them when they were in his 7th & 8th grade Confirmation class. This was maybe thirty years ago. The member remembered all the fun the students had, activities, including a Confirmation retreat. They remembered that at the retreat Pastor Larson shocked them by leading a discussion, a blunt discussion, on the topic of sex. As I recounted this to Pastor Larson at the funeral luncheon, he explained to me that it was something of a controversial topic back then, sex ed, if you talk about it in school, and how, and so he decided to address it forthrightly and faithfully with the young people of church. I said to him, “Think of the way that has stuck with that person—that their pastor talked about that with them.” “Oh I remember that too,” said Pastor Larson, but in this case, I mean Pastor Larson’s son, Mark, who is also a pastor, and who was also there at the funeral luncheon listening in as I told his father this story. Pastor Mark Larson said “I was also on that retreat, where the pastor, my father, gave a talk about sex.”

I’m not going to now preach a sermon about sex—at least not entirely. I bring this up because a couple of weeks ago I read an article, an opinion piece, that makes a connection, strangely enough, between that story, that topic, and this day, Ash Wednesday. Or, rather, the article didn’t make the connection, but you will. The article’s author, a doctor, said one of the things she does is give sex ed presentations at her daughter’s middle school. She noted that this can cause some embarrassment, for her offspring especially. But the doctor noted that while our schools once lacked sex ed, what they need now is death ed.

This doctor practices critical and palliative care medicine in a hospital. She loves to save lives, and lauds all the ways that modern medicine makes this possible, but she mourns the way that her profession sometimes avoids talk of death. And not just her profession, but schools, our society and culture. You may know what she means, you may have read articles or books about this, about the way we can avoid talking about death, or, as this and some other doctors say, how we medicalize death, which can be a way of not addressing it, an attempt to ignore its sometimes imminent reality. Meanwhile, on the other end of the spectrum, our culture is pretty much saturated with sex. You can barely buy a car, or a soda, without a suggestion of it. You can’t even come to church on Ash Wednesday without hearing about it.

That doctor says that now, in addition to talking about what happens at a life's beginning, she has a presentation about what happens when a life is ending. She says that the students, while sometimes at first embarrassed, are eager to learn more about it, welcome the opportunity to focus on this. As should we all, the doctor concludes, saying. "We need to learn how to make a place for death in our lives."

I read that article and thought, the church knows that. The church does that—and especially on this day, Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent, invites us into a season of reflection and repentance, of taking stock of who we are and how we live—and how we die. The church does this, and on this day in particular, with a ritual act that acknowledges the place that death has in our lives. We acknowledge this with a ritual act about as blunt as they come: a black cross traced on our foreheads, and it's accompanied by a blunt refrain: "Remember you are dust."

We hear those words and we recall one of the earliest stories in the Bible, a story about life's beginning, a creation story in which God gathers together the dust of the earth, and shapes it into a human being, and breathes life into it, "Remember you are dust... and to dust you shall return." When this human body fails, when the last breath goes out of it, the body returns to dust: buried, or burnt, or both. "to dust you shall return," we say to every person who comes forward, to those near life's beginning, and to those near life's ending.

But Ash Wednesday is yet blunter than that, for it is also about another kind of death. Our culture does not like to talk about this kind of death, either. Even more than medical death, our culture avoids talking about this other aspect of human frailty: the kind of death that is sin.

We also talk about that here, in church. We say the word sin. We say that sin does not just saturate, but permeates, originates, in our society and in our very selves. We say that here—not to degrade, nor diminish, nor shame, nor accuse. That would be a sinful use of the word sin. Nor, for all of sin's pervasiveness, nor do we say that humans and the world are inherently bad. That would be bad theology and sloppy biblical interpretation to boot. We speak the word sin to acknowledge that just as surely as our bodies will fail, so do we. Time and again we fail to offer the best part of ourselves. We let timidity, or passivity, or pessimism prevent us from being constructive and capable and kind. We look for ways that others are lacking, and overlook the ways we contribute to a problem. We assume the worst and then live up to it—or sink down to it. We let the good in which, and for which we've been created wither, and die. This is that other kind of death that is sin, that has such a place in our lives. .

We come to church, on a cold dark night in the middle of the week, to say that, admit that, hear that, wear that. The dark crosses on our foreheads will make it patently clear.

But there's another cross below them, a cross that we wear not just on Ash Wednesday, but every day, a cross that is traced invisibly, and permanently. Gordon wore it as an infant when he was baptized, when Pastor Oden traced a cross upon his brow and called him child of God at his baptism—and even before that, for Gordon, and for all of us, for God has loved us, and redeemed us, even before we were born.