

Ash Wednesday 2018

February 14, 2018

When I first started thinking about going into the ministry, it was because I wanted to work with youth. I was going to go to seminary and be a youth pastor in some big church somewhere, do Tuesday night youth fellowship meetings, lead mission trips, help kids through their awkward teenage years, (because Lord knows mine were awkward enough). I didn't really think that ministry also mean planning meetings, budget discussion with the session, personnel reviews, and preaching every week. I didn't want to do any of those things. But somehow I got it into my head, or God got it into my heart, that after seminary I was called to be the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Ashland, Kansas. It's a small congregation, about 50 people in worship, about 130 on the roll of members, but a wonderful loving group of people. I was privileged to be their pastor. And I led session meetings and budget discussions and I preached every week, all those things that I thought I didn't really want to do. But I don't believe I had ever thought, I don't believe it had ever occurred to me, that if I were to become a pastor, if I were to really serve the people of the church, that I would watch people die.

I had done a couple of funerals, but in my second year of being a pastor, one of the members of our church was with her mother in the hospital. I had visited them a couple of times there, but one night she called me and asked me to come down and sit with her mother who was in a coma. I did, and we talked for an hour or so and then, since her husband was out of town, she asked me if I could sit with her mother while she went home and helped the sitter put her children to bed. Of course I did. And so I sat with her as she slept and I waited for Jan to come back. And her breathing got more and more shallow until it finally stopped. Since this was in the days before cell phones, I buzzed the nurse to have her call Jan and tell her that her mother had passed. I sat and held her hand as she died, and for a few minutes after.

Does this make you uncomfortable, talking about death? Well, you're not alone. I think all of us are.

And aren't ministers supposed to preach about uplifting things, so that you leave here feeling good

about yourself and about God? Well, there's a truth here that we hear on Ash Wednesday, "Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return." All of us are going to die someday. None of us are getting out of this alive. But we don't want to hear that, because it sounds so sad, so depressing.

Well, it is sad, but it is not hopeless. Ash Wednesday has never meant an abandonment of hope.

When that cross of ashes goes on our heads, it means we are marked. Remember that when we baptize we also make the sign of the cross on someone's forehead, saying, "You have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever." When we make the sign in ashes and remind each other of our mortality, we are saying that in spite of death, in spite of our mortality, we still belong to Christ. "We are not doomed. We are, in fact, claimed by something much larger than ourselves.

Those ashes are a sign that we are claimed by God. Maybe tonight doesn't have the rich pageantry of Easter Sunday; maybe there aren't flowers and eggs. But in these ashes there is hope for even our darkest nights and a sign of the joy that is to come."