

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Duke Chapel

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Deathly Healthy

Oh the irony of being told by Jesus not to brag about our piety and then coming here or some other liturgically appropriate place every year on Ash Wednesday to be visibly and publically marked as pious. And not only that, but we will wear this mark when we leave here and return to the waiting world. // Or maybe not. Maybe you are among those who slink into the restroom on the way back to class or the office and scrub vigorously at the smudge of ash we'll give you before you leave here today. There could be several motivations for that behavior, not the least of which is the warning Jesus offers—"beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them..." Got it, Jesus; let me get rid of this mark of piety before anyone sees it.

That would be a good reason for rubbing it off. But more likely, it's just too hard to explain to those who don't observe the seasons of the Christian year—I dare say there are more of those Christians at Duke than there are of us who do change the color of the altar cloth according to a calendar that makes no sense in the Roman dating system, the system that runs the rest of our lives. Change to purple today, always a Wednesday, but what is Wednesday, March 5, this year, was Wednesday, February 22, last year. Two years ago my azaleas were budding on Ash Wednesday, last year it snowed, and this year we're living through weather apocalypse and we really don't know what might happen by tomorrow. The dates and the colors are peculiar to Christians who live the faith a particular way that is not shared by all Christians. The Common Lectionary is a foreign word to some of us and ashes are just dirt.

Then there are those on our campus, even more of them, who don't practice the Christian faith. How do we explain Ash Wednesday to all of them? Sometimes it's just easier not to start. And that means getting rid of the ashes before they ask.

It's not that we're ashamed—we're not or we wouldn't be here at all. It's that what we're doing doesn't make sense. I'm sure all of you bounded out of bed this morning exclaiming to yourself or to whomever listens to your morning exclamations: "I can't wait to get over to the Chapel today and let someone put ashes on my forehead and tell me I'm going to die." That's what you all jumped out of bed and said today, right? Probably not...

We're in the city of medicine, for heaven's sake. We don't talk about death. We talk about innovative cures, treatment breakthroughs, medical marvels. We talk about health initiatives and health clinics and health care. Well, maybe not health care since that seems to be a political matter and my grandmother said, "Don't mix politics and religion." Never mind that Jesus was the original universal health care provider... My grandmother didn't have that class, but we'll just stick with being healthy today.

And it's all the rage, you know, being healthy. There are books and classes and web sites dedicated to our health. We know what to eat, where to exercise, when to sleep—even though we don't do it much around here, how to recreate, and who to call when we need help with any of these questions about being healthy. Have you checked out the student affairs website? They have more people and more resources dedicated to your well-being, your health, than the entire faculty and staff of the religion department. No really, I counted them.

So, why would we come here to talk about death and how would we ever explain to the people back in our dorms, classrooms, and offices that this is what we've been doing for the last hour...

The mark of ash goes on our forehead and someone says, "From dust you have come and to dust you shall return." It's biblical, 3rd chapter of Genesis, to be precise. It's also a matter of fact. It's what happens to all things that live—they die. So, I don't think this bit of ash is any newsflash to us and it wouldn't be to the people in our dorms or classrooms, even if they're not inclined to such an overt display of the facts.

What is a newsflash and might be astonishing to folks outside these stone walls is what we're willing to die for and what we're willing to die to. In this training ground of Christian discipleship we learn to die for some very counter-cultural things. Some of us might die to luxury, not because we don't have the money to be extravagant, but because we recognize our waste

is another person's want. So maybe we recycle, leaving a stack of cans and bottles on the floor until we happen to be going out to the recycling bin. Or maybe you are among those who keep a bucket or bowl on your countertop and collect smelly, rotten vegetables for composting in the garden. Luxury might dictate that I just throw all this stuff away and my kitchen would look a lot neater to boot, but I'm trying to die to needs that take a toll on the environment because creation is not about me. Admittedly, it's a privileged kind of dying. Many people in the world don't have the privilege of recycling because they don't have the luxury of throwing anything away.

We could up the counter-cultural ante: let's say, some among us might die for peace, not on the battlefield, but as a protest to battles. You might be thinking of the first person to set himself ablaze in Tunisia, igniting the Arab Spring. Or perhaps you're thinking of Tibet where 127 people in the past 5 years have staked their lives on peace by going up in flames. But closer to home you might remember the story of Norman Morrison, a Christian—Quaker—who set himself ablaze in a Pentagon garden, right outside Robert McNamara's office, to stake a claim for peace while the United States was embroiled in war. That's a tough one—some of you know this story well because his wife, Anne, went to Duke. She was in the student faith community that I now lead. She's written a book¹ about the events that day, what led up to it and all the hurt and healing that followed. That kind of dying for is not a culturally acclaimed practice; it is distinctly counter-cultural. Some would say, "pointless." But that was Norman Morrison's point, the pointlessness of war.

Before we can die for something though, whether it's the environment or peace, we have to die to the things that rob us of life. They're easy to name and you probably already know some of them: wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, and gluttony. I'm certainly not the first to compile that list. Most believe that from these seven vices, come all the other behaviors that rob us of our lives. These seven are the root of all the things we should die to.

We know we could consume everything within reach, we could insulate ourselves from every form of danger, we could rule the world. We do, actually, rule the world, and it turns out to be a lot of work and to be very expensive. Jesus also considered all those possibilities for his own life for forty days before he died to all the life denying claims of the world. Starting today we have before us forty days to consider the same death—dying to life denying claims.

That is what I hope we remember today. We don't need to remember that we will die—we all know that. We don't even really need to know what we'll die for—most of us also already know that. We need to remember what we should die to in order that we might have life and live it abundantly. In a paradoxical kind of way, these ashes actually mark life, not death. They mark us as those willing to die to all the life denying claims in the world around us. When that happens, we might actually start living.

So, come get the mark of life and wear it proudly out the door. The world will see you as someone marked by death and they will be right. What they won't know is, in this death we are more alive today than we have ever been before. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹Anne Morrison Welsh and Joyce Hollyday, *Held in the Light: Norman Morrison's Sacrifice for Peace and His Family's Journey of Healing* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books) 2008.