

Thankful Memorial, Chattanooga
February 22, 2023
Ash Wednesday
Truth-Telling on Ash Wednesday
The Rev. Leyla King

Isaiah 58:1-12
Psalm 103
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Recently, a Thankful One told me about a word she keeps hearing in other Christian communities when they talk about death. The word is “transition.” Instead of saying “Joe Smith died last Tuesday,” folks will say “Joe transitioned last Tuesday.”

I admit to feeling both confused by and critical of that euphemism. Transitioned from and to *what* exactly? That’s a new one to me.

But nowadays we have all sorts of euphemisms for death. Depending on the context, you might hear “gave up the ghost,” “called home,” or – most ubiquitous – “passed away.”

I never use any of them.

If someone tells me that so-and-so “passed away” I’ll usually respond with, “I’m so sorry to hear that they died.” It may be momentarily shocking, but I want language that tells the truth and reflects the reality in which we live – and die.

Because I find that honesty is what we need most in times of grief and crisis. It is a comfort to people to tell them the truth, to name the reality of our shared experience. To do otherwise is to go along with what can become a harmful pretense. To say what is true, on the other hand, is to give language – and some sense of control – to people who are desperate for something real to cling to at a moment when things are at their most surreal.

Children, with their extremely low tolerance for the inauthentic, know instinctively the comfort of naming reality.

Some years ago, I visited friends to support them as their then-5-year-old daughter, Zaynab, underwent surgery to correct problems with her eyes. After the surgery, Zaynab had to have drops put in her eyes every 4 hours by all three of us adults: I’d hold down her body while her mom held her head and opened her eyelids and her dad put in the drops. It was a horrific process that left all of us feeling traumatized and miserable. Every four hours.

After one of these ordeals, Zaynab and I sat on the stairs together. Her swollen eyes were closed but the tears were still flowing. “Why is this happening to me?” she asked. “I don’t know, Zaynab,” I told her. “It’s such a bummer.” Suddenly, her tears stopped and she turned up her beautiful little face to me: “What’s a ‘bummer?’” she asked.

I was surprised by her question but answered as best I could: “A bummer is when something happens that you don’t have any control over but it’s bad and you just have to find a way through it.”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, Zaynab's face relaxed and she smiled – the first time I'd seen her grin since her surgery. "Yes!" she exclaimed with relief. "That's exactly what this is. This is a bummer!" Without intending to, I had given her language to describe her reality and it made all the difference in her world. Finally, she could name her experience properly and it assuaged her anxiety and gave her back some sense of control.

On Ash Wednesday, the Church insists on telling us the truth about our reality. There are no euphemisms here. No pretense about how far we have fallen or how we will end. Ash Wednesday insists on authenticity: "You serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers," the prophet Isaiah tells us baldly. We "quarrel" and "fight" with one another and "strike with a wicked fist" (Isaiah 58:3-4). Neither does the psalmist pull any punches: "Our days are like the grass [...] When the wind goes over it, it is gone, and its place shall know it no more" (Psalm 103:15-16). And starkest of all are the words we hear as the cross of ash is smeared upon us: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

Tonight, on this and every Ash Wednesday, we hear the truth about the reality in which we live. We are all sinners. We have fallen short of God's dream for us. And we will, all of us, die. Not "pass away," not "be called home," not "transition." Die. We will die. We are made of dust and to dust we shall return. That is our reality. We must not shy away from it.

But, strange as it may seem, naming that stark reality is actually the gift of Ash Wednesday. When we face up to the fact that we will certainly die, that we are dust and to dust we shall return, we will find that the idea of death isn't as scary as we first thought. Just as Zaynab's ability to name her experience as a "bummer" brought her comfort, so too naming death for what it is brings us comfort. It takes the sting out of death because it removes at least some of our uncertainty about it.

If we say that Uncle Jimmy "transitioned," we will be left wondering – transitioned to what? If we say that Aunt Sue "passed away," we might imagine she has become like a gas. But when we say, with confidence, "remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return," we know exactly what we are dealing with – that we will return to what we were before – something familiar if yet unknown – and we need not be afraid.

That is the truth, and the good news of Ash Wednesday. So, yes, "remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." And do not fear. For "the Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness," and "the merciful goodness of the Lord endures for ever." Amen.