

**Homily, St. Andrew's
Ash Wednesday, Feb 10, 2016**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Today, Ash Wednesday is about everything that's wrong with Christianity. In particular, I'm thinking of the 2 main themes of sin and death. Sin and death aren't exactly topics that the vast majority of us want to spend any time at all considering, let alone focussing on! Indeed, the focus on these prominent themes in Christianity is often named as the reason people have either left a Christian church or choose not to engage in church in the first place. And so today, with our focus on sin and death, is probably the best (or worst) example of everything that's wrong with Christianity.

When it comes to sin, it's not uncommon to hear something like... "Nobody wants to hear about sin! It's just so depressing. We don't need to hear about how bad we are. I believe in a God of love. We don't need all this sin stuff!" It is, in general, a reaction against a classic view of sin and our sinfulness, particularly as a condition from our birth from which we cannot escape, our ontological state, or sin as personal moral failure... a list of "thou shalt not's..." such that if you're having any fun at all, you must be doing something wrong. And so the reaction has come: "God is love" and we just shouldn't talk about sin anymore. I wonder, however, if another approach is possible? What if instead of denying or ignoring sin, we sought instead to re-consider, re-think, just what sin might be? What if sin was something more or something different than "original sin" or personal morality? What if sin was about the choices we make that hurt ourselves; choices that hurt someone else; choices that even hurt the planet? What if sin is about brokenness... broken relationships, broken spirits, broken communities? What if sin is not an ontological state but simply making mistakes? What if we could normalize sin by recognizing that we all make mistakes; we all hurt others without intending to; we are all broken sometimes and in some ways?

The wages of sin is death... or so goes a classic Christian formulation. Sin leads to death, meaning an eternal death into either eternal damnation or eternal life, depending on your acceptance of Christ. The difficulty many have with this basic formulation is that it is about something abstract and in the future: sin is our state of being, death is optional. Sin and death are spiritualized, rather than grounded in our everyday experience of life. And so our spirituality is mostly, if not strictly, something ethereal, other-worldly, with little connection to our concrete, day-to-day lives. Putting more stock in this ethereal world means that the only thing that really matters in this world, in our actual lived existence, is a spiritual commitment. Everything else is secondary. Not only can this allow us to distance ourselves from the real pain and real joy of life and from concrete relationships with ourselves and those around us, but it can actually encourage a denial of the here and now and the people in it - in ways that can at best be disconnected, and at worst, become pathological and even abusive.

We need to find a better way. Simply ignoring sin and evil as real problems, for real people in the real world doesn't help solve any of the troubles within and around us. Spiritualizing away the impact of loss and death in our lives into an eternal realm is equally

unhelpful for our pilgrimage of life. And so the challenge of our time is find a way to integrate our belief in a God who wants for us abundant life, with the on-the-ground realities we live everyday - the hurt and the fear, the pain and the suffering, the laughter and the joy. We need to bring all of who we are and what we experience to the practice of our faith. We need to set Jesus' story and the broader story of salvation next to our stories, as we seek to make meaning from it all.

The uncomfortable truth that we literally mark, with ashes, during our celebration today, is that death comes to us all. Death is not optional. Even so, not so long ago, I might have said that, like sin, death and dying aren't exactly popular topics of conversation. I would have said that except that over a hundred people sat in our hall last Saturday to talk about death and dying. This topic has entered the popular consciousness with the legal challenge to the criminal code as it relates to assisting another end their life and the resulting political conversation. It seems to me that it's a conversation we struggle with because inherent in it are spiritual and religious questions of meaning. For what are we here? Does it matter how we live or how we die? What are our individual rights? What role does community play in our journey through life? What do we do about suffering? And the list of questions goes on... in a society either unfamiliar with our Christian language, rituals and beliefs, or that outright rejects them, or what they think they are, this legal, medical and political conversation offers us both a challenge and opportunity to find new ways to connect and communicate with those beyond our community of faith, and to explore our own beliefs and practices in a quest to discover how they can be life-giving for those struggling with big questions.

Dr. Atul Gawande explores the experience of aging and dying in his book *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*. His introduction begins: "I learned a lot of things in medical school, but mortality wasn't one of them... Our textbooks had almost nothing on aging or frailty or dying. How the process unfolds, how people experience the end of their lives, and how it affects those around them seemed beside the point... the purpose of medical schooling was to teach how to save lives, not how to tend to their demise." (1) Through specific stories of individual people and families, he reflects on how the experience of aging has changed over the past 100 years or so. He notes, in particular, how it has become primarily a medical experience, concluding at one point that: "the problem with medicine and the institutions it has spawned for the care of the sick and the old is not that they have had an incorrect view of what makes life significant. The problem is that they have had almost no view at all. Medicine's focus is narrow. Medical professionals concentrate on repair of health, not sustenance of the soul." (128) He sees our approach of putting our fate in the hands of people skilled in technology rather than understanding human needs as an experiment that has failed because human beings naturally and primarily seek a life of worth and purpose... at every age and stage.

If repair of health isn't enough. If "sustenance of soul" is what matters most in the end, then I like to think we as followers of Christ in community, can make an important contribution. But to do so, we must leave behind our abstract theological concepts, our spiritual jargon and our concern for eternity in favour of participating in our community, developing broad and deep relationships, honestly sharing in the brokenness caused by the bad choices and mistakes of ourselves and others, and courageously seeking reconciliation and understanding in concrete ways.

In the end, Dr. Gawande cites startling research about letting go of medical treatment seeking to cure terminal disease and employing more palliative and hospice care. He noted the changing practice of insurance companies, big business in the US, as they seek to lower costs in the last year of life for policyholders. Insurance companies have recently begun increasing hospice options for people with a life expectancy of less than a year, without requiring ending curative treatment. The results have been both stunning and puzzling... they found that simply giving “seriously ill patients someone experienced and knowledgeable to talk to about their daily concerns;” talking about how they could live their best life now... was enough to decrease the use of hospital services, and thus costs, dramatically. Other studies have seen similar results and provide more evidence that honestly facing one’s mortality, talking about dying, improves and extends life. He writes: “people who had substantive discussions with their doctor about their end-of-life preferences were far more likely to die at peace and in control of their situation and to spare their family anguish.” (176-7) It strains credibility, perhaps, but Dr. Gawande is clear and convincing that the research consistently shows that merely talking about goals and priorities as one anticipates death reduces suffering, improves physical capability and the ability to interact with others and actually extends life.

In just a few minutes, you will be invited to come forward to receive the sign of ashes on your forehead, along with the words: “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” This ritual can, at its best, serve to reduce our suffering, improve our remaining days and years, and actually extend our life simply because it faces us towards our shortcomings and our mortality - our sin and our pending death. They might not be popular topics... this might not be a popular ritual... today may represent everything that’s wrong with Christianity... but then, maybe our guilt from wrong-doing can serve to form us into more loving people; and maybe our courage to talk about our mortality can serve to bring us clarity about what matters to us the most. And maybe, just maybe, when we live out of this love and clarity... the grace we receive through these words and actions, others may see our freedom and our joy, and all may know justice, peace and love.