

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

February 14, 2024

Honesty

[Readings](#)

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

We are gathered here this evening to face some uncomfortable truths. That is, after all, one of the reasons we subject ourselves to this forty-day season of reflection, repentance, prayer, and spiritual discipline. We are here to confront the truth that we are all ultimately broken sinners who regularly fail to live as we were created to live. We are here to confront the truth that even those of us trying to follow the way of Christ frequently fail. We are here to confront the truth that we are hypocrites, we are those named in our readings this evening. We are those who want to be seen as good and we can take or leave actually doing good. We are here to confront the truth that we are mortal. We are going to die.

Does that make you feel uncomfortable? In my experience, odds are it does. We human beings don't like to dwell on the fact that we are mortal and going to die. And American culture certainly discourages us from being honest and open about that fact. Think of all the euphemisms we employ to avoid using words like died and death. We talk about people "passing on," "going to meet their Maker," "they went to a better place." All to keep from saying, "they died."

This hesitancy doesn't generally surprise me, given what I know of how human egos operate. Our egos are going to typically react with fear or anger when confronted with the reality of mortality. Our egos jump up to defend us with distraction or by ignoring it. But pretending something we're not too keen on isn't happening doesn't change anything other than ourselves. And it makes shallower people of us when we cannot overcome our ego's reluctance to acknowledge our own limitations.

Being honest about death, being willing to confront the reality of it, that's how we can take away its power over us. That's how we can stop the eternal dance of our egos attempting to spare us from difficult truths. I am going to

die. That is reality. There are times in my life when that thought has terrified me. Other times it's almost funny. But sometimes...amazingly...I can even accept it. And when I do, my priorities change...my perspective shifts.

My work has me interacting with approaching their deaths. And it's interesting to me how often there is a shift in those people. Whether they're older or have a terminal illness, there's a definitive change in perspective when acceptance of death occurs. Being becomes more important than doing. Relationships are far more important than work. Giving is more important than accumulating. Connection takes precedence over accomplishments.

What strikes me about this shift in perspective, is that the new perspective is often quite in line with following the Way of Christ. In trying to follow the Way we are called to prioritize connection over achievement, cooperation over competition, being grounded in our identity as opposed to our activities, supporting one another, and trying to live more fully in the present. It almost seems as though accepting the reality of death is an important step on the Way of Christ, as it can give us a more helpful perspective.

The power of this shift in perspective has been known for some time now. Even before Christ, in classic antiquity you can see precursors to what medieval Christians will call *memento mori*, remembering your death. There is much to be gained from this difficult practice.

Of course, the times in my life when I've come to accept my own mortality come and go. I move through different responses all the time. Sometimes my ego jumps into control making me fearful or angry, sometimes I can fight it off and be at peace about my own mortality. It takes practice I suppose, like anything else.

Thank God for Lent then! Here's a chance to practice being okay with death. A chance to confront the reality of our unavoidable demise, and practice accepting it. Lent provides us with a powerful framework for reflection and wrestling with all sorts of hard truths. It's tough work, but it's kingdom work. It's the work of walking the Way.

And besides, ultimately, we know that death does not have the last word. Our forty-day journey through Lent. Our forty-day opportunity to practice *memento mori*, ends not with Good Friday, but with Easter. That bright and beautiful day that promises an end to death, that promises life, life abundant and life eternal. Amen.