

“REMEMBER YOU ARE DUST...”

Post Christian and Presbyterian Churches --

February 28, 2010

Psalm 51:1-2, 10-12

For the last three months, I have been visiting a 15 year-old boy and his family who live in the country about an hour from Lubbock. Daniel has been battling cancer since he was nine and just last week his dear mother, Laura told me with tears in her eyes, that it is hard to remember what life was like for their family before Daniel got sick. Daniel is the oldest of three children and he worries how his parents and sisters will handle his death and go on to have a good and productive life which he wants for them. In some of our very open and honest discussions, Daniel has told his parents that he has had a wonderful life and while he wishes he had a whole lot longer to live and go to college and get married and have a family, he is accepting of the reality that he probably won't live to be sixteen, is grateful for the many opportunities of life and love that he has experienced and is leaving the rest in God's hands.

Since Daniel received the news at MD Anderson last summer that there was nothing more the doctors there could do to treat his cancer, he has been keeping a journal of things he wants to see and

do and experience before he dies. There are literally hundreds of things he has written down in the notebook he carries with him and checks off when one of his goals has been reached. Some of his wishes are silly, fun-loving, thrill-seeking and truly indicative of his teenage enthusiasm such as wanting to drive a Ferrari, have his friends over to watch scary movies and eat pizza, give his girlfriend, that his mother doesn't like, a bracelet, go swimming in a tuxedo, enter a roping contest to win a coveted belt buckle, and call into a 1-800 diet plan, pretending to be someone in need of a weight loss program. Some of his goals are indications that he is wise beyond his years and that even though his body is sick, his spirit is truly strong and still seeking ways to embrace life in new ways. One of the things Daniel wanted to do before he dies was to hold a baby and not be afraid. A few weeks ago when he was in the hospital for pain management issues, he was able to hold an abused baby in the care of Child Protective Services and watch the baby fall asleep in his arms. He also hopes to be able to meet with teenagers who have made bad choices and gotten in trouble and give them encouragement and hope by reminding them that life is short and precious and that we need to help each other and not hurt one another.

Daniel is an amazing human being and while it is difficult to watch the tumors grow on his head and his body grow thin and wonder with each day how much longer he has here, my life is richer for knowing him and his dear family and my faith is strengthened by how he continues to assure his family and friends that his living and dying are in God's hands and that he will truly be okay and desperately wants them to be so too. I am not sure how any of us are going to be when he dies but what I do know is that we have the chance to be wiser, more loving, more whole and more alive because of our encounters with this magnificent young man.

Today is the second Sunday of Lent and Daniel's story is helping to give form and meaning to my experience of the forty days between Ash Wednesday and Easter when we ponder our mortality and acknowledge our dependence upon God for life in its many forms. On Ash Wednesday, I shared Daniel's story in the devotional I was asked to do for the beginning portion of the Covenant Health Systems monthly board meeting. I told the board members it is a humbling experience to have ashes smudged on your forehead in the sign of the cross and be told, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return."

In a Christian Century article (March 27- April 3, 2002) entitled, “**Dust to Dust,**” the Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor says this about her experience of Ash Wednesday, “I began the season of Lent with ashes on my head and I did not put them there myself. I got them at church, where I knelt at the altar rail with others who pressed their shoulders against mine in hopes that together we might withstand the truth we were about to hear. ‘Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return,’ the priest said to each one of us as he rubbed ashes on our foreheads in the sign of the cross.

Like God, my priest showed no partiality. He said the sentence the same way to sick people as he did to those who were flush with health. He did not soften his voice for the children, either, although that must have been hard for him. Leaning over a baby whose breath was still fragrant with mother’s milk, he marred her perfect complexion. ‘Remember that you are dust,’ he said to her as she reached for his sooty thumb,’ and to dust you shall return.”

A medical sociologist from Canada, a man named Arthur Frank wrote an insightful little book about what illness and adversity have taught him about life and the gift of his mortality after surviving a heart attack at age thirty-nine and testicular cancer at age forty. He titled his book, **At the Will of the Body**, and profoundly shares the

lessons he learned about living from being a patient at the brink of death.

He writes, “the only real difference between people is not health or illness but the way each hold onto a sense of value in life. When I feel I have no time to walk out and watch the sunlight on the river, my recovery has gone too far. A little fear is all right. It is all right to know that in a month I could be lying in a hospital bed asking myself how I spent today. Holding onto that question—how did you spend today?—reminds me to feel and see and hear. It is too easy to become distracted. When the ordinary becomes frustrating, I have to remember those times when the ordinary was forbidden to me. When I was ill, all I wanted was to get back into the ordinary flux of activity. Now that I am back in the ordinary, I have to retain a sense of wonder at being here at all.

Like Job, I have had my goods restored to me. Secure in the knowledge that I am dust, I enjoy what I have. I even run again, not as far or as fast, but with much greater pleasure. I want to keep running, but some day I will have to stop. I do not know what that day will be like. If I have recovered well but not too much, I will remember a poem I keep over my desk by the late Raymond Carver, called ‘Gravy.’ A man, an alcoholic, is about to die, but he

changes his habits and lives for ten years. Then he gets a brain disease and again is dying. He tells his friends not to mourn:

“I’ve had ten years longer than I or anyone expected.
Pure gravy. And don’t you forget it.”

Arthur Frank says, “I try not to. When I become ill again, and someday I will, I hope it will not be the total break in my life, the radical discontinuity, that I experienced before. Health and illness are not so different. In the best moments of my illnesses I have been most whole. In the worst moments of my health I am sick. Where should I live? Health and illness, wellness and sickness perpetually alternate as foreground and background. Each exists because of the other and there is no rest in either word. In ‘health’ there can only be fear of illness, and in ‘illness’ there is only discontent at not being healthy. In recovery I seek not health but a word that has no opposite, a word that just is, in itself. When I seek that meaning of my recovery, the opportunity of illness, I call it gravy.” (p. 135)

Arthur Frank has observed that the view from the edge of life is different and often much clearer than the way that most of us see things. Life-threatening illnesses and aging bodies often help us to see that all of life is a gift, that we are not as in control of things as

we think we are and that we live much more by grace than we can ever truly comprehend.

While my work with dying people and their families sometimes overwhelms me with sadness and stirs the depths of my unhealed soul, most of the time the relationships I develop with those on the last leg of their journey are filled with gifts of love, humor, great connectedness and powerful insights into how I can best live the gift of my life with great passion, faith and integrity.

Most weeks I drive to Levelland to bring a strawberry milkshake to a dying 86 year old woman who lives alone, smokes like a chimney, and does not allow anyone to visit her during “The Young and the Restless” and “Oprah.” Mildred is a very delightful and private widow who has let me know in subtle ways that she does not want any soul-searching discussions about her living or her dying, her beliefs or her regrets. Mildred has made it quite clear that the only two things she wants from me each week are a strawberry milkshake and a short prayer. After dealing with patients who demand much of my time, energies and emotions, I am very thankful for my light-hearted and casual encounters with people who know who they are, who communicate what they like and don’t like, who have made peace with what has been and are

open to the unknown and serendipitous possibilities of life and love that await them when all is said and done.

“Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” During this Lenten season when we ponder our mortality and the limitations forced upon us by illness, aging and dying, may we be open to the gifts of life, love and healing our loving and gracious God seeks to give to us in the here and now of our lives. Barbara Brown Taylor concludes her article about Ash Wednesday with these powerful understandings, “The gospel of the day is not as much about the poverty of our flesh as it is about the holiness of the ashes, which are worthy of all reverence. It was God who decide to breathe on them, after all, God who chose to bring them to life. We are certainly dust and to dust we shall return, but in the meantime our bodies are sources of deep revelation for us. They are how we come to know both great pain and great pleasures. They help us to recognize ourselves in one another and they are how God gets to us, at the most intimate and universal level of all.

Bodies frighten us too, of course---not only when they are sick or dirty but also when they are passionate or demanding---which may be why we are so often tempted to think of ourselves as essential spirits instead. But believers in the word made flesh are called to

resist that temptation, even as the ashes fade from our foreheads. The ashes that stay with us on our journey to Easter are blessings which announce God's undying love of dust no matter what kind of shape it is in."

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving and Faithful God, we gather on this cold and windy winter morning hoping to experience a sense of the holy and be open to the possibility and potential that awaits us when we ponder our sins and our mortality this Lenten season. We are humbled and blessed when we look back across our days and see how the problems, tragedies and sorrows of our lives are mixed in with the unspeakable joys, accomplishments and wonders of our unique experience of being alive. We give thanks for the gift of life we have and when we are able to see how your love has sustained, nurtured and upheld us all along, we are more able to believe that you will likewise be with us in the unknown and scary things that are sure to unravel in our future.

As you know, O lord, it is difficult to be honest with ourselves about our limitations and our limited time here on this earth where we sometimes think that we are in charge and have the world by the tail. On this day as we remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return, we are reminded of the grace that claimed us long ago and the faith that infuses our everyday living especially when we are totally unaware of your presence in our lives or your hand in our plans. Help us on this day to be more okay with not knowing our destiny, not controlling others in our midst, not doing all that

we should, and not being sure of the many choices we have to make. As we deal with the many limitations forced upon us by illness, hard-headedness, aging and dying, free us to be open to the pregnant possibilities of life, love and healing you seek to give to us in the here and now of our lives.

We ask that your presence would be a guide to our loved ones who are sick, grieving, heartbroken, hurt, depressed, and struggling with life-changing issues. Help us to pray for them and with them and to find creative ways to be your heart and hands to them so that we are all made more whole by life's difficulties and tragedies. In the name of our Lord Jesus who showed us how to live and how to love, we pray, Our Father...Amen.