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In the Ash There Is.... – A Communion Meditation for Ash Wednesday

The man who, in the student protest movement of the late '60s, coined the phrase "Never trust anyone over thirty," will soon celebrate his 76th birthday.

The computer animation company Pixar, known for its wonderful work in movies like "Toy Story," "Finding Nemo," and "Cars," is full of young and talented people. One of them remarked recently on his Facebook page, Barbara reported to me, that when he sees people in their 30s and 40s, he thinks their so old they must be ready for hospice care.

On an internet discussion board where I participate, several twenty-somethings remarked that it was weird and creepy to see folks in their 50s and 60s engaging in public displays of affection.

Barbara and I have both sometimes remarked – in the midst of creaking knees and frustrating aches and pains – that while we wouldn't want to be 25 again, for just one day we would love to have the bodies of 25 year olds again.

But we aren't given that choice.

And more rapidly than he ever thought possible, the man who wasn't going to trust anyone over thirty is now well more than twice that age. And those twenty-sometimes who find passion among their elders to be unseemly will discover more rapidly than they ever can imagine that they will be among those ranks. And while this 60-something, thanks be to God, is not ready for hospice care, the undeniable truth is that life is indeed mortal and transient. Or as the church and scripture have put it from the ancient of days, "From dust thou have come and to dust thou will return."

The one thing that liberals and conservatives, scientists and mystics, atheists and the religious can agree on is that we shall die. And that is partly why we gather tonight, to be reminded of and to acknowledge that fact, in the midst of a culture that does everything it can to avoid that reality and that worships youthfulness. And yet I understand why some people dislike and avoid Ash Wednesday. Why, these folks ask, would you ever want to come together and take an hour of your life and acknowledge that your life will be over sooner or later? It's not something most of us need reminding of. Physical death has touched virtually all of us, and all of us have likely known the death and diminution and diminishment of dreams. Do we really need to acknowledge that in this way on this night?

Yes.

For here is the key to why we come and why we indeed acknowledge together what we all have known and experienced: such deathliness, such "ashiness," as it were, such diminution and diminishment is not the final word. Our culture worships youth because it does not know the truth of life abundant and life eternal, it too often denies the wisdom of the aged whose bodies may be failing but whose spirits are full of things worth knowing.

But we know, and so we are here tonight to be reminded that, yes, life is mortal and that to dust we return – but we only do so because we also know that we are God-created, God-breathed-into dust. For even on the hard days of Ash Wednesday, or Maundy Thursday, or Good Friday, or Holy Saturday, we also know the promise of the un-defeatable reality of Easter, the reality that God does not die and therefore we are not dust **only** but are also God's beloved forever. Tonight is a night for acknowledgment, yes, but it is the acknowledgment of hard things that also knows that, as the hymn says, "in the bulb there is a flower."

And so in the ashes tonight, dead like that apparently dead bulb, is the reminder that

we are not to be captive by the culture's lies and fears, the reminder that even in the driest and most desiccated, the power, the truth, and promise of God lies hidden. It is why we conjoin the ashes and the Table of our Lord, for this Table is the reminder that not even death, *not even death*, will ever defeat God's love, ever separate us from God's love. The feel of ash on our skin and the tang of juice and the texture of bread on our lips belong together tonight as the testimony both to the fact that earthly life is indeed mortal, but also that that is not the only truth and it is not the ultimate truth. No, the ultimate truth is that, as we have been singing tonight, "just as we are" God is with us ever, always, now and unto eternity. In the bulb there is a flower, in the ash there is a promise, in the bread and the cup there is life abundant life eternal.