

**"Life Is Too Short"  
Sermon for Ash Wednesday  
Lectionary Year A  
February 6, 2008**

**Texts: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21  
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We realize it when we catch up with old friends and see how much their children have grown. Wasn't it just yesterday when they were babies? How can they be married and having babies of their own? Time passes much too quickly. We see it when we go to our high school reunion. When did these people change? They've gained weight, gone bald, gotten so gray. They look really old now. Where has the time gone?

We see it when we pause long enough to take a good look at ourselves in the mirror, something we avoid doing as much as possible. We prefer to live in denial. But when we look closely we see the lines and the wrinkles. And we have aches and pains we didn't used to have; we have more trouble sleeping than we used to; our metabolism is not what it once was; our memory is not what it once was. Almost every day we are faced with the fact that life is short, and it seems to be going by a lot faster than we want it to.

We are reminded of the shortness of life when we go to a funeral, especially if the person who has died is close to our age. We realize in that moment that life is something both precious and precarious. There are no guarantees as to how long it will last. But we are perhaps most clearly and deliberately reminded of life's brevity in this service of

worship, for it is on Ash Wednesday that we have the ashes imposed on our foreheads and are told those rather disconcerting words, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." It's hard to participate in this particular worship service and not come face to face with your mortality.

Life is short, very short, too short for certain things. For just a few moments I would like to direct your attention to two of our texts of scripture for this evening, the one from the Old Testament prophet Joel and the one from Matthew's Gospel. I would like for us to look at these passages together, while I make two suggestions concerning how life is indeed too short.

First, **life is too short to spend it desperately seeking the blessing of other people.** In our Gospel lesson, Jesus has some harsh words for the hypocrites. We are not to follow their example. But notice carefully what it is that Jesus is critical of with respect to them. *He does not attack what they do; he attacks their motivation for doing it.* Jesus never says that we are not to be pious, not to give alms, not to pray, not to fast. We are to do these things as a part of our spiritual disciplines.

The scribes and Pharisees that Jesus refers to as hypocrites were good people. We'd be glad to have a church full of people who are as committed as they were. We could use a little more piety, a greater amount of supporting the poor, deeper involvement in prayer, and more of a willingness to go without meeting our own needs for the sake of the church and its ministry. These hypocrites were extremely religious. They did all the right things, they just did them for the wrong reason.

What is it Jesus warns concerning their example? "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them." Your faith is not to be a show for the benefit of those who happen to see it. Discipleship, following Jesus as Savior and Lord, is not to be done to impress people in order to make them think better of you. Christianity is not to be understood as a way to win friends and influence people.

What is true with respect to faith is true for our whole lives. Jesus is telling us something we really need to hear, namely, *that our lives are not to be oriented toward gaining the acceptance and approval and affirmation of other people, their blessing, so to speak.* We don't want to go down that path, because ultimately it goes nowhere. It's a dead end.

Yet that's the path so many of us are not just walking down, but running down, as hard as we can. Why? I can't speak for you, but I can for me. I know why I catch myself on the road of seeking the blessing of other people. It's because I'm insecure, and I'm insecure, at least in part, because it wasn't until just a few years ago that I really received the blessing of my parents. When I was growing up they had trouble loving me unconditionally. It was hard for them to accept me for who I am and grant me their approval. Because of their own insecurities, they had a difficult time affirming me and helping me to develop a healthy self-esteem. They just couldn't do it, probably because it had not been done for them by their parents. They couldn't bless me, because they had not been blessed. They simply didn't know how.

I have been extremely fortunate, however, because the Lord has provided for me an extended family and surrogate parents who were able

to bless me at least partially along the way until my parents got to point where they could. Teachers, adults in the community, ministers, church members, family friends, and friends of mine did for me what my parents couldn't for many years. These people did their best, sometimes without even realizing it, to bless me by accepting me, approving of me, and affirming me. Hopefully, our church can and does provide at least some of the blessing that people may have missed out on before.

Let's face facts, though. It is quite hard to be blessed by another person, because it is so difficult for any other person to accept us, to approve of us, and to affirm us. It is almost impossible for any of us to love someone else unconditionally. *Why? Because we are so insecure.* All of us, no matter how much we have been blessed by our parents or other people, still have insecurities. And when we are insecure, we are threatened by differences, the differences between us and other people. I have trouble accepting you, approving of you, and affirming you, because you are different from me, and my insecurity tells me that since that is the case, *I must be right and you must be wrong.*

If we are different from each other, one of us must be wrong, and it needs to be you, not me. My selfhood is too fragile to deal positively with our differences. The way I think, the way I feel, the way I act, that's the way you are supposed to think, feel, and act. If you don't, how can I possibly accept you, approve of you, and affirm you? So I can't bless you, because you are not just like me. You are different. I'm too insecure to give you the unconditional love you need, and you are too insecure to give me the blessing I need.

So this is why it's such a frustrating and ultimately fruitless effort

to live desperately trying to obtain the blessing of other people. You can't really get it, because they can't really give it. And if you orient your life in this direction it will leave you feeling empty, sad, bitter, angry, and disappointed. Life is too short to spend it that way. Fortunately, that is not the only way we can live, which brings me to the second of my two suggestions regarding the shortness of life. Not only is life too short to spend it desperately seeking the blessing of other people, but **life is too short to spend it deliberately avoiding the blessing of God.**

I direct your attention to our passage of scripture from Joel. The prophet shares with the people the word of the Lord, "Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast [unconditional] love, and relents from punishing. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him . . .?"

There it is. A blessing. The blessing. Your blessing. My blessing. Acceptance, approval, affirmation. Where does it come from? *It comes from the only one who is really capable of giving it, God. God is the only one who can accept you enough to bless you, approve of you enough to bless you, and affirm you enough to bless you. The Lord is the only one who can love you enough to bless you, to meet your deepest need to be blessed. God is the only one who can give you the identity you need, the self-esteem you need, the security you need to be an authentic person, someone who can then, in turn, bless other people.*

What does it take to be blessed by God? *It takes a turning, a returning, a reorientation of our lives toward God.* It takes choosing a different path, the one that leads to God's blessing. We call this turning repentance, and it is why we are here this evening at the beginning of the Lenten season. We are here to return to the Lord. We are here to start on a new path. We are here to take a different journey from the one we've been on. We are here to quit living primarily to please those who can never really bless us and to begin again living primarily to please the one who can, who wants to, who will.

"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Life is short, very short, too short for certain things. Before you return to dust, return to God. *Before you return to dust, return to God.* God is gracious and merciful, more so than we are. God is slow to anger, more so than we are. God is abounding in steadfast love, more so than we are. God relents from punishing, more so than we do. God can bless you, more so than any of us can. Life is too short to avoid deliberately what you need most and what God alone can give you: acceptance, approval, affirmation. The blessing.