

Life is the Gift of Time Enough to Love

In my closet is a purple wool jacket, part of a suit that used to be my grandmother's. It has a label from Marshall Field's, the old department store in Chicago, where she was from. I loved my grandmother dearly, and have loved wearing that purple jacket. It's as if I were wrapped in her love: warm -- and just slightly scratchy.

Recently I took the jacket out from my closet and noticed a small hole on one sleeve where a moth must have had a snack.

'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume...', said Jesus. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:19-21).

On Ash Wednesday, we go through our "closets," to see what we have, what we need, what we can let go of. What's really important.

All religions have days like this. In Judaism, it's Yom Kippur. For Muslims, it's the season of Ramadan. In our secular world, it can be New Year's Day with its resolutions, or a birthday: "Hmmm, 32, 52, 72 – did the year meet my dreams for it?"

Today – Ash Wednesday – is another day for assessment, maybe *the* day for it. It's hard to avoid assessing things. We have ashes placed right on our forehead – in the middle of the face we present to the world, over our brains that give us thought - and we hear these words: "You are ash, and to ash you will return. Life is short. Life is fragile. Here one day and gone the next."

On Ash Wednesday, with this ritual of ashes, it's hard to escape that death will come.

But even today, is there a small part of you, deep inside, wondering, "Really? Others might die, but maybe somehow I'll be the exception"?

That's the thinking of the main character in Leo Tolstoy's short novel, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Ilyich, an upright judge, has an illness that

seems to be wasting him away, but he cannot grasp it, "cannot grasp it at all."

The logic he had learned as a lawyer – "that Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal" had always seemed correct as applied to Caius, but by no means to himself....Caius represented man in the abstract, and so the reasoning was perfectly sound, but he, Ivan Illych, was not an abstract man...Had Caius ever been little Vanya with mama and papa...Had Caius ever known the smell of that little striped leather ball Vanya had loved so much? Had Caius ever kissed his mother's hand so dearly, and had the silk folds of her dress ever rustled so for him? ...[F]or him, Vanya, Ivan Ilyich, with all his thoughts and feelings... it simply was not possible that he should have to die... He tried to dismiss the thought as false, unsound, morbid...tried to revert to a way of thinking that had obscured the thought of death from him in the past....He would say, "I'll plunge into my work..." [But then IT would keep returning, before his mind.] (79-80)

Today, on Ash Wednesday, with Ivan Ilyich, we end up with ashes pressed onto our forehead, and for at least a moment, are forced to think: *It is true. My life is fleeting.*

I will die. You will die.

There are two responses we can have to this, and they're represented in our prayer book by the two different prayers given for Ash Wednesday.

One response is the one most of us associate with Ash Wednesday: we are only ash, an insignificant pittance in relation to the Founder of the Universe. We always fall far short of The Truth represented by God, so we need to bewail our sins – the many ways we've failed - and beg God's forgiveness.

Friends, if this way of understanding Ash Wednesday – by acknowledging your sins -- is what you most need to become whole and healthy again, then do confess, and you will be assured of God's unbounded love of you.

But there is a second way to respond to this reality: that your life is short and fragile. It's to focus on how precious each and every moment of your life is. How marvelously made you are, made in God's own image. Your life is short *and* precious. You see, life is the gift of time enough to love.

Life is the *gift* of time enough to love.

When Jesus urges us to focus on what really matters, what won't be eaten by moths or rust away, it's to remind us of this gift we have. What shall we do with it? As the Cape Cod poet Mary Oliver says in the final lines of *The Summer Day*, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Could it be, that in any day, among all the things on our long to-do list, what matters most is to give love to others? And to receive love from God and others?

So when you think about the traditional Lenten practices, of giving up chocolate or coffee or Facebook, please consider this. Are you giving up something based on the first interpretation of Ash Wednesday - that focuses on your sins - as if you need to punish yourself? Or are you doing it as a way to honor how precious your life is, what is most important, what the real treasures are?

If you give up Starbucks, what can you do with those dollars saved that will shower love out into the world? If you set aside Facebook, with that found time can you visit someone lonely, or spend some time with another so you won't be as lonely? Can you meditate or pray a bit more, soaking up God's astonishing love for you?

I can give up my grandmother's purple jacket, but still live in her love.

Life is short. And your life is precious to God, already a treasure! May you value it.

May God bless you on this Ash Wednesday, in the way you most need.