

My grandmother died, I believe, in 1978. She spent her entire life in a small, South Carolina mill town, Chesnee, not far from Spartanburg. She started teaching in a country school while she was still a teenager on a provisional certificate because she had never been to college. She kept taking courses over the years to renew the certificate, and she finally graduated a few years before she retired.

She was a devout Southern Baptist who walked her talk. I don't believe she ever tasted alcohol. I remember that she wouldn't eat burgundy cherry ice cream because she didn't trust the word burgundy. She loved to gossip but it was never malicious, and the point never seemed to be to build herself up or make her look better than someone else.

She didn't have a judgmental bone in her body. It was from her that I learned the little saying: "There's so much bad in the best of us and so much good in the worst of us that it hardly behooves any of us to talk about the rest of us." It was the way she lived her life – except for the innocent gossiping.

Her funeral was at the First Baptist Church of Chesnee, where she had been a member her entire life, I guess. I remember two things about the sermon more than thirty years later. The first is that the pastor extolled the character and the virtue of my grandmother. She was a good woman. She had her share of difficulty and sorrow in her life, but she did it with good grace. Everybody in Chesnee knew that.

The other thing about the sermon that I still remember is that most if it consisted of a warning to all the people present that we were headed for the same destiny. Our turn was coming and we had best be doing what we could to get ready for it.

That was the church of my childhood even though it was in Marietta, Georgia and not Chesnee, South Carolina. Funerals were always treated as opportunities to bring home the reality of death and the mortality that we all share. It was a way to bring into sharp focus the urgency to repent, to give one's heart to Jesus and to straighten your life out. This will happen to you, too. Don't wait too long. Right now would be a good time.

It isn't my cup of tea. I don't believe that God wants any of us to live in fear or to love God because we are afraid not to. I don't believe in a religion of fear. I believe that God invites us into a life of joy and a Kingdom defined by love. I believe that God invites us into a life of joy and a kingdom defined by love. I believe the words of Jesus: "I came so that you might have life, and have it abundantly."

I believe that God stands more ready to give than we to receive. I believe God forgives more quickly than we ask. All lives know tragedy and disappointment and loss. And life is also filled with opportunities of joy. I believe God calls us to live with boldness and courage. My grandmother's life was worthy of celebrating. Every life is.

It isn't my cup of tea, but there is something to be said for recognizing the limits of life. We are only given this gift for a season. My sense is that most of us live most of the time as if we have forever. One of Scarlett O'Hara's favorite lines was, "I'll worry about that tomorrow." We live most of the time like there is always tomorrow. Maybe that isn't true for you. It is for me.

What we lose – what I lose – is the urgency of now. What happens is that the brilliance of life is dulled, the colors are muted, the intensity and the sparkle are dimmed. And of course we can't live in constant

intensity; life would be too exhausting. Sometimes we just have to worry about some things tomorrow. But sometimes I think we miss the point by trying too hard, running too fast.

The people of faith in the time of the New Testament believed that Jesus would return soon. They believed that the world would end – probably in their lifetime – that God would bring God’s purposes to fulfillment. That belief gives a pulse, a heartbeat, to the stories of the New Testament. There is passion in the telling. There is passion in the lives of those who followed Jesus and carried forth his mission.

We don’t have that expectation much any more, not really. We have spiritualized the Kingdom of God and maybe heaven a remote place somewhere else. But the truth is – whether Jesus returns soon or not – we don’t have very long. It will pass with the blink of an eye. In the Episcopal Church we have our own way – a liturgical way – of marking that reality. We smear ashes on our foreheads with the words, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return.” This time of Lent is a season to think about that.

Jesus went to the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus for dinner. These were people he loved in a special, intimate way. He wept at Lazarus’ grave. He was close to Mary and Martha. While he was there Mary took a pound of perfumed ointment and anointed Jesus’ feet and then wiped them with her hair. The author of the Gospel of John sees it as an act of tender love preparing Jesus for burial.

Judas was also there, and he took offense maybe because of the tenderness. “Why was this perfume not sold and the money given to the poor?” It was costly stuff. Think of the good that could have been done with it.

Jesus said, “Leave her alone. You always have the poor with you but you do not always have me.” The need will always be there; I won’t be.

It doesn’t mean that it isn’t important to care for the poor. It is important. You have to hear these words in the context of all that Jesus said and did. It isn’t a call to irresponsibility or capriciousness. It isn’t an invitation to accept the injustices in the world around us and fix our hearts on heaven instead. It isn’t a call to waste.

But it is a call to joy. This day will never be back again. We will use this day – we will spend this time – and then it will be gone. If you have a chance to laugh sometimes today, don’t miss it. If there is an opportunity for tenderness don’t rush past it. People are too important. Life is too fragile. We only have a little while. We don’t have forever.

Amen.

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