

**Homily**  
**Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene**  
**Ash Wednesday**  
**Wednesday, February 22, 2023**  
**6:30pm**

Text: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

My second summer in seminary, I worked as a chaplain intern at Duke University Hospital. It has been six years and I still struggle to find the words to describe my experience. The hospital halls were sacred ground; the stories I encountered even more so. Every day I was a witness to life and death. Babies were born. People were given second chances at life. Others received terrible, life-altering news. I watched people die – sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly.

There was a song that summer that caught in my soul: Jill Andrews' "Rust or Gold."<sup>1</sup> I worked rotating on-call shifts with the other chaplain interns and residents, shifts where I would spend the night alone in the hospital in case a chaplain was needed. I did not sleep well on those nights - the bed in the on-call room was narrow, and I was always listening with one ear for my pager. To help me relax, I would listen to this song on repeat. The chorus goes:

*Rust or gold, you decide  
What you see, what you hold  
Let it burn there in your hand  
Watch it grow, watch it grow  
Breath of life come and fill your lungs  
And give it away until it's gone  
Or hold it in and let it die  
Let it die  
Let it die*

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJgL\\_UPFYrc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJgL_UPFYrc)

On Ash Wednesday we remember that our breath is meant to be given away. Formed from the dust of the earth, filled with the breath of God – we spend our lives inhaling and exhaling until, at last, we exhale one final breath and return to the earth from which we came. We cannot take our breath with us to the grave; it belongs to God.

But in the intervening space, what do we do with the breath – the life – that God has given us?

Jesus says, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (vv. 19-21).

Whether for fear or greed or selfishness, the world teaches us to hoard. Hoard your money. Hoard your time. Hoard your grace and your goodwill – only give it to those who deserve it.

But grace is neither earned nor deserved. Jesus calls us to live generous, expansive lives. This breath we have been given is meant to be given away. Not in loud and ostentatious shows of piety, but in the steady, quiet work of bringing a bit of God’s light and love to the little patch of dirt we call home.

If there was a single impression from my chaplain summer, it was learning reverence for our sacred breath. How fleeting our lives are, how fragile our bodies – and yet God has given us His sacred breath. How impossibly loved we are by our Creator to be given this honor! No matter the length of our lives, every inhale and exhale remind us that we belong to God. We do not need to be afraid of giving it away because it was never ours to begin with. Instead, we are stewards of this breath, this life, for the glory of God.

Today I invite you into the wilderness of Lent. This is a season of spiritual wandering. If we remain open to this season, we will discover that the Holy Spirit is with us in the wilderness: Prompting us to examine how we steward our lives; moving us to repentance for the ways we squander our lives and the lives of others; comforting us when the reality of our sinfulness and mortality feels too heavy to bear; encouraging us to grow in faith and witness; and reminding us always – always – that we are God’s beloved.

So, friends, as we enter the wilderness, let us inhale [inhale], and exhale [exhale], and receive this piece of courage from United Methodist poet Jan Richardson:

“Beloved Is Where We Begin”

If you would enter  
into the wilderness,  
do not begin  
without a blessing.

Do not leave  
without hearing  
who you are:  
Beloved,  
named by the One  
who has traveled this path  
before you.

Do not go  
without letting it echo  
in your ears,  
and if you find  
it is hard  
to let it into your heart,  
do not despair.  
That is what  
this journey is for.

I cannot promise  
this blessing will free you  
from danger,  
from fear,  
from hunger  
or thirst,  
from the scorching  
of sun

or the fall  
of the night.

But I can tell you  
that on this path  
there will be help.

I can tell you  
that on this way  
there will be rest.

I can tell you  
that you will know  
the strange graces  
that come to our aid  
only on a road  
such as this,  
that fly to meet us  
bearing comfort  
and strength,  
that come alongside us  
for no other cause  
than to lean themselves  
toward our ear  
and with their  
curious insistence  
whisper our name:

Beloved.  
Beloved.  
Beloved.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Beloved Is Where We Begin." <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2016/02/11/lent-1-beloved-is-where-we-begin/> © Jan Richardson. janrichardson.com.