

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd

Pastor Steve Loy

Ash Wednesday 2015

Rosabel Dubbin's children celebrated her eightieth birthday by renting a large home in Washington for the family to celebrate her life. She raised five children in a three bedroom concrete block house built in the 1950's. Their absent father spent his days drinking and later disappeared from their lives. With a high school education Rosabel supported the family working minimum wage jobs while teaching them to be frugal and joyful.

Raised during the depression she provided for her children with what the rest of us might call "nothing." For them it seemed like everything. Rosabel's life revolved around a few things; her children, the preschool where she worked and her church. One year as part of a stewardship campaign she shared the story of raising her children. She talked about tithing and putting God first.

She worked as a teacher's aide at a preschool until the age of 79. Every Thursday she came to church to pray with the women's prayer group. She did house work, checked on her neighbors, kept tabs on her gaggle of children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. On Saturday she baked bread to be used for communion at church.

Her cancer diagnoses came as no surprise to her. She had not been feeling well and as a cancer survivor fifteen years earlier she knew the signs. This time she had no intention of enduring surgery and treatment. She called her children. They arranged hospice care and a rotation. Each of them would take a turn caring for her in her home. As she lived her last days she continued to teach us about discipleship. She taught us how to die with dignity, surrounded by her family, telling stories, laughing and welcoming everyone who came to the door. Martha and I took our two daughters to see her. She lay in bed, weak and smiling. She talked with the girls, asked them about school and told them little things about her life.

In a noon worship service on Ash Wednesday I put ashes on a few dozen worshipers with the words "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return" a haunting reminder of the brevity of life.

From the church I go to Rosabel's house to pray the liturgy of Commendation of the Dying. Her daughter-in-law, two of her daughters and I gather around her bed. The opening prayer reads, "Almighty God, look on Rosabel, whom you made your child in Baptism, and comfort her with the promise of life with all your saints in your eternal kingdom, the promise made sure by the death and resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." I make the sign of the cross on her forehead with oil. Teetering at the edge of two lives, one brief, the other eternal, she needs no reminder. Her body weak, her breathing shallow - she embodies Ash Wednesday as she had so often embodied Easter. Standing by her bedside I understand Ash Wednesday in a new way. It is a commendation of the dying - for all of us on our way to the end of this life. It serves as a reminder to live every day as if it is our last.

This life deserves more than groveling asking God to forgive our faults. This life deserves more than bemoaning our circumstances or wanting something more. The shortness, the fragileness invites us to embrace the depth and abundance of every day. Rosabel had plenty about which to complain and yet I never heard her complain. She was never petty. She never criticized or looked for opportunities to take advantage of another person. At its best Ash Wednesday serves as a beginning point, a restart, a reminder to embrace life as a gift from God, to live every day aware of God's goodness. To live more deeply, more authentically, more honestly and to leave behind the should, the oughts and have tos, to abandon the regrets and to embrace life fully.

Lent has shifted for me. I spend less time apologizing to God and more time working to live the abundance that is the reality of God's presence.