

ANOINT YOUR HEAD WITH OIL

Rev Fred Garry

When the season for the funeral comes, let the dead body be decently attended to the grave, and buried. During such solemn occasions, let all who attend conduct themselves with becoming gravity; and apply themselves to serious meditation or discourse; and the minister, if present, may exhort them to consider the frailty of life, and the importance of being prepared for death and eternity.

- Book of Order, Directory of Worship, Chapter 13.

When the season of Lent approaches I am reminded of the direction given for funerals in the Book of Order. This was the direction from 1789-1960. Unlike much of the Book of Order, this remained the same for quite some time. I ponder this direction because Lent seems to be about a “becoming gravity” and “serious meditation.” This is a time to “consider the frailty of life.”

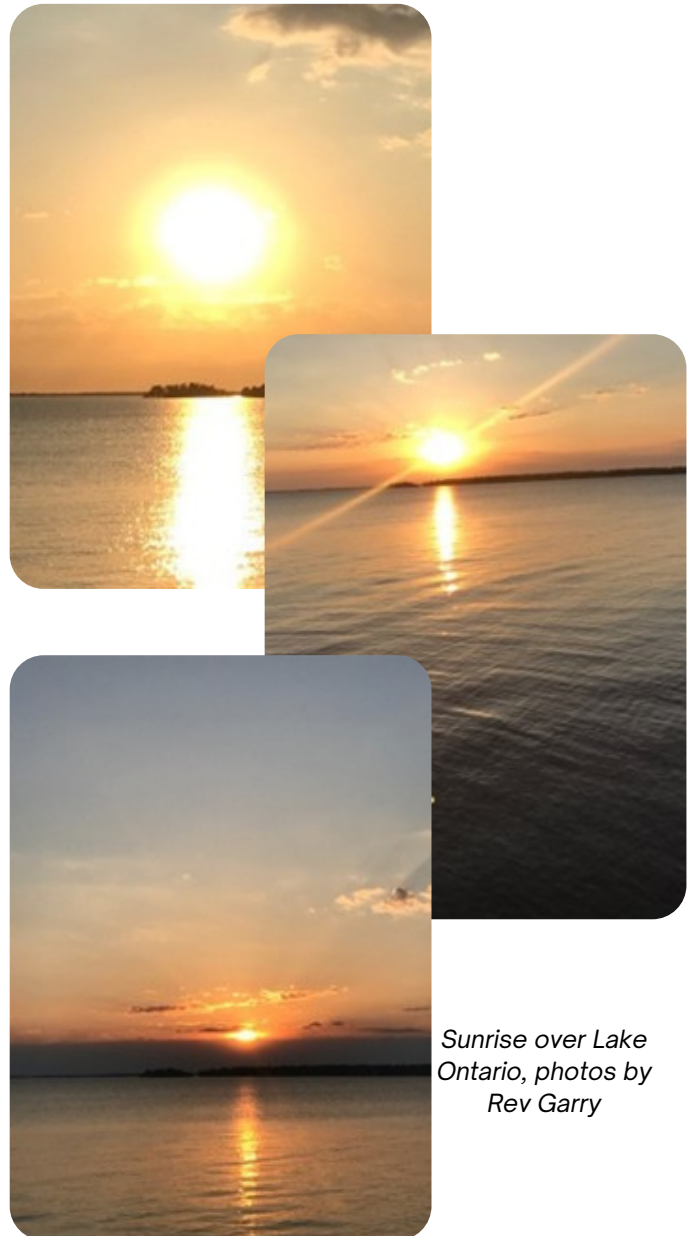
Yet, as I consider the frailty and the gravity, a part of me always finds this forced in Lent. At a funeral this sobriety makes sense. Loss, grief, heartbreak, these are sad and no one escapes mourning untouched by solemnity. From March 5-April 19 to abide in serious meditation wherein we are “prepared for death”? That feels imposed. The protestant in me always wants to protest the “no hallelujahs in Lent.” When I consider the fasting and the penance and the restrictions I want to say, “life is hard enough.”

Three things to consider as you approach Lent this year. Remember the direction of Jesus. If you fast, anoint your head with oil. In other words, don’t look downcast, don’t be sad. Anointing one’s head with oil is an act of healing and beauty. In a sense he is saying if you are going to “impose” ashes also “impose” oil.

Second, America is experiencing a crisis of sadness right now. There are an ever-growing number of “deaths of despair.” For the first time in a century our life expectancy has gone down because so many people are dying of suicide and overdose. If you are going to “consider the frailty of life” consider the need for hope overcoming despair, consider how much the

church needs to be light today for those struggling with darkness.

Lastly, consider the sunset. The three pictures below are taken within a few minutes of each other. Each is beautiful. What I love in such a moment is to remember how fleeting is time, how brief the moment of splendor. So often as I watched the sun set over Lake Ontario, I was struck by how prepared I felt to live life. The colors “imposed” an oil as it were and healed me. So often there is more than enough sadness, darkness. What a different Lent we may experience if our discipline was to find the “frailty of life” in splendor



Sunrise over Lake Ontario, photos by Rev Garry