

Attending Our Own Funerals

C Ash Wednesday

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return.

When he was in his early thirties, soul singer Teddy Pendergrass was at the height of his career as a hit musician and sex icon when a car accident left him quadriplegic. In an interview he gave Terry Gross many years later, he described about how that event altered his sense of himself. Being young, famous, and rich before the accident, he had developed a very large ego. But afterwards he spiraled into a deep and suicidal depression.

To help him through this time a therapist, who was also quadriplegic, suggested that Pendergrass stage a funeral for himself as a way to get closure on his past and his able-bodied identity. So Pendergrass laid himself out under a sheet, and had his friends and loved-ones come up and say their "final words"ⁱⁱ about who he'd been and what he'd meant to them. He called that moment a real "turning point" in his life, because lying there, under that sheet, listening to people talk about him in the past tense, he realized that he was not ready to be dead yet. As he put it, "Dying suddenly became a non-option." Even more important, the car accident and the mock funeral realigned Pendergrass' fundamental sense of himself. Through that encounter with his own mortality, his own limited-ness, he discovered a new humility and joy in living, a fuller sense of identity outside of his role as a performer. As a result, Pendergrass gradually returned to recording and performing, but he also created a foundation to help others who'd suffered from spinal cord injuries.ⁱⁱ

Well today is Ash Wednesday, the day on which the church invites us to attend our own mock funeral, to remember and confront the fact that we are dust and to dust we shall return, and to ask ourselves hard questions in light of this fact: Are we living as fully as we are called to live? Are we loving as deeply as we are called to love? Are we pursuing right and just relationships with God, the rest of humanity, and all of creation? Is there anything about our finiteness and our inevitable return to dust that inspires us to make any changes?

And it strikes me that, in line with the renewed zeal for life that Pendergrass found in his mock funeral, our texts for today don't invite us to self-flagellate and become depressed. They don't beckon us into a sense of unworthiness so profound that we become paralyzed. Instead, they call us out of our sins and our delusions of grandeur and draw us back into the world. As the wonderful scholar, Walter Brueggemann, puts it, "They have in mind not preoccupation with failure and inadequacy, but rather a future-oriented embrace of new life that God will accomplish through a daring obedience. The daring obedience of 'the new fast' in Isaiah 58 is the recovery of neighborliness alongside the oppressed, the hungry, the naked, and the homeless poor." Likewise, Psalm 51 "eagerly petitions for a new life and never doubts that God will give it."ⁱⁱⁱ Even Jesus doesn't call on us to stop giving alms, fasting, and praying, but merely to stop doing those things in a way that has us focused on ourselves and not on God and our neighbors.

The recovery of neighborliness alongside the oppressed, the hungry, the naked, and the homeless poor. In other words, the recovery of neighborliness alongside the unfortunate of all stripes. Pendergrass recovered his neighborliness alongside the unfortunate quite literally--by experiencing his own misfortune, and then using that

tragedy to help others who were similarly disabled. But we can also discover this neighborliness in less literal ways. So it is our prayer, as we receive the ashes on our foreheads, as we remember that we are dust and will return to dust, that God lead us down our own path of discovering our neighborliness with the unfortunate. It is our prayer, as we encounter our finiteness and our imperfections, that we too can find in God's grace the freedom and the vision to help a hurting world.

ⁱAll quotes taken from "In Memoriam: Soul Singer Teddy Pendergrass" on *Fresh Air*, broadcast 1/15/10.

ⁱⁱThis according to wikipedia, accessed 2/16/10 at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teddy_Pendergrass

ⁱⁱⁱWalter Brueggemann, "An Answering God," *Sojourner's Magazine*, accessed online 2/17/10 at <http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj1002&article=an-answering-god>.