

Ash Wednesday – Year C

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Those words about dust have been used to remind us of our mortality. And usually, that brought with it thoughts of facing some last judgment at our death – which in turn was designed to make us shape up! Reform your lives! Change your ways! The motivation for the change was fear, I think. Be aware that you are going to die; be worried about what kind of judgment you’ll get because of all the bad things you’ve done in your life. Confess your sin, seek forgiveness, so that when you die, you might squeak through into “heaven” – wherever that might be. Even our opening Collect carries some of those thoughts. We prayed, “that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness...”

“Remember that you are dust...” Those are sobering words. They get in our face, literally, on this day when we set out – very intentionally – to focus on – what? What are we about as we begin this season of Lent? I don’t think we’re meant to spend our time and energy during Lent focused primarily on our sinfulness or wretchedness. For one thing, that keeps the focus on *us* – not on God, not on our neighbor. We certainly need to look at our sin – not to beat ourselves up with it or carry it around, but because it is not who we are. Sin is whatever separates us from God. - Sin is whatever I let separate me from God – God present in my own center, God present in those around me, God present in creation, God present. And it is this sense of separation, the experience of brokenness that brings us time and time again to these ashes.

In Romans, Paul tells us that *nothing* can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus...neither powers nor principalities, nor nakedness nor the sword, neither death nor life...nothing. And that is true. God’s love is the source of our being; no *thing* can separate us from that – except by our own choice. And that is what we name as sin – the things, the actions, the inactions, the choices, the attitudes that are not of love, not of God.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Dust – and today’s ashes – are also certainly a reminder to us of our brokenness sometimes... and ashes are so often a sign of ruin... Years ago we all heard the song “Dust in the Wind” – it spoke of dreams and accomplishments only as dust in the wind, concluding that all of us are just dust in the wind. There is despair hiding there – a despair that many people feel in these days when so much seems wrong with the world.

But a short poem popped into my computer screen last week – and it gave me a new perspective on dust.

What about those times when things aren’t just
broken but shattered beyond repair. Shattered
to the point of dust...
you can’t glue dust back together.

But...when mixed with water, dust becomes
clay. Clay, when placed in the potter’s hand, can
be formed into anything the potter dreams up!

Dust doesn’t have to signify the end. Dust is
often what must be present for the new to
begin.

In the Epistle two weeks ago, in 1 Corinthians, we heard Paul say, “The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.” I said then that we are a people who believe in the Incarnation – that God has entered into creation, into the very matter that God created. So being made of dust, the same dust as the stars and the trees and all creatures great and small, and all our sisters and brothers, including our brother Jesus, is not a *bad* thing – but a reminder of the one God from whom all creation comes. The dust is a reminder of who we really are, and from Whom we come.

Yes, let us be aware of the sin in our lives – those things we let separate us from awareness of God’s presence. Those are things we could try to let go of this Lent – and candy probably isn’t on the list! But let us be more aware of the *presence* of God’s presence – in the very dust that we find scattered in our own lives and the lives of those around us. Let us see in the dustiness of people we don’t really like, or the dust of prejudices we’ve held onto for most of our lives, or the ashes of broken relationships, the opportunity for God’s creative love to bring new life.

Let us remember that we are dust... messy dust, but God dust. Let us entrust ourselves, dust and all, into the hands of the potter – to be made into whatever will serve the needs of our neighbors, and whatever will restore all things in Christ.

May it be so.

Amen.

- [Joel 2:1-2,12-17](#)
- *or* [Isaiah 58:1-12](#)
- [2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10](#)
- [Matthew 6:1-6,16-21](#)
- [Psalm 103 or 103:8-14](#)