



SPIRIT-FILLED DUST

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21, Joel 2:1-2, 12-17, 2 Cor. 5:20b-6:10

Tonight is Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday is an important service on the Christian liturgical calendar because it is a season that reminds us of our MORTALITY. Tonight, when many of you come forward for the imposition of ashes upon your hands or your forehead, one of the pastors will share the words, "From dust thou camest, and to dust thou shall return. Repent and believe the gospel." These penetrating words help to set the tone for the beginning of the Lenten Season.

The calendar of the world and the calendar of the church are often at odds with one another. Our world, especially in the 21st century, moves much faster than it should. This is why we have so many stores now preparing for Easter sales long before we actually celebrate the day in the church sanctuary.

The question and reality of our mortality, however, is one the world is reluctant to remember or even consider. We live in a death-denying culture. When this topic comes up on the church, people have often said, "Pastor, why did you have to talk about something so depressing as death and dying today?" The Christian faith has never denied death but does celebrate that Christ has rendered invalid its power over us. Anyone who has stood at the side of a grave knows what I'm talking about tonight.

The great truth we learn during Lent is that we know some day this body will return to the ground and all we can see and touch will lose its value when we die. Jesus reminded us that we were not to store up treasure here on earth that would rust and rot, but to store up our treasures in heaven. Yes, we occasionally need a solemn reminder that we really need to cultivate those values in our journey that will last.

Sometimes it is painful to learn that some of our values and attitudes that presently empower our Christian witness are not consistent and are not worthy for this life, nevertheless the eternal life. However, like a good store manager, from time to time we need to take inventory to be sure we will not wind up bankrupt on Judgment Day. It is so easy to save up items and collect gadgets until our homes have no more room for storage and new items. The same thing can happen in our spiritual life. We can become so full of SELF that our spiritual house has no room for God and the eternal.

Many years ago, a British newspaper offered a prize for the best response to the question, "What is wrong with the world?" The winning letter was the shortest. This

note declared, “Dear Sir, I Am,” and it was signed G. K. Chesterton. As we open the Lenten season, the insight of Chesterton on the human condition is correct.

One day President Calvin Coolidge went to church without his dear wife, who was ill. President Coolidge was a man of few words. When he returned home from church, his wife asked him what the minister had preached on that day. President Coolidge said, “Sin.” His wife replied, “Oh, well, what did he say about it?” Coolidge responded, “He is against it.”

It comes as no secret to anyone here tonight that God is against sin, because by sinning, we turn our lives into poor legacies. However, acknowledging our sinful activities and being liberated from its powers are two different things.

So on this Ash Wednesday we to remember we are sinful and mortal. This is the ground level perspective.

However, on this Ash Wednesday we are also called to remember who God is – and how God has provided for our salvation and redemption despite our sinfulness.

In **Joel 2:13**, there is a call to repentance, “Return to the Lord your God, for God is gracious and compassionate – slow to anger – and abounding in love and he relents from sending calamity.”

Romans 5:8 shares with us, “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

We learn from **Genesis 2:7**, “The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man became a living being.” It reminds us we are more than dust – we are spirit-filled dust. It is God alone who transforms us from mere dust into living beings. This is why the human spirit cannot rest in this beneath itself. This is why the rich young ruler’s salvation was not in having everything – but in losing everything to gain the one thing needed – God.¹

This is why the prophet Joel cried out “Rend your hearts – not your garments.” Our needs are great. They must go beyond the external to the deepest place in us – the heart! We judge not on the outward appearance.

Recently, a man who was experiencing stomach pains went to his doctor. The doctor reported that he had ulcers. The man said, “I must be eating the wrong foods.”

“No,” the doctor said, “what is eating you is on the inside.”

Yes, our need is deep and great. Our need is for God.

St. Augustine – who tried for years to satisfy the deepest needs, longings and appetites by earthly pleasure and worldly insights – broke down and wrote, “Our hearts are restless and empty until they find their rest and purpose in Thee.”

So Ash Wednesday is much more than a depressing ritual. It can be a moment of deliverance and liberation. We are called to remember that by ourselves we and all of life are no more than dust. However, with God we are living beings. We have eternity in our hearts.

So we heed Paul's cry in **2 Cor. 5:20b**, "to be reconciled to God." We heed the words of Jesus that our efforts be more than a piety parade – but a heartfelt journey to know and love God.

During this Lenten season – with great effort and intentionality – we let go of those sins, attitudes, immoral choice, immoral thoughts, and inappropriate lifestyles that pull us away from the glory of God and his will for our lives. In short – we repent. We turn around. U-turns are allowed and encouraged.

We seek to nurture this transformation by Bible reading – prayer – fasting – service - giving – and seeking the mercy and forgiveness of God. We accept the reconciliation that God offers. In all of these spiritual disciplines and actions – God is the audience and motivation. If transformation and conversion occurs in your life – don't worry about broadcasting it to others – they will see the evidence in good time.

Jesus never renounced the practices of prayer – fasting – or giving from our spiritual life. He practiced these disciplines himself. It was the proper attitude – the purpose – the motivation of doing them that he was after.

C. S. Lewis, in his masterpiece **MERE CHRISTIANITY**, writes, "Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first perhaps, you can understand what he is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: You knew that these jobs needed doing so you are not surprised. Presently, he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of – throwing up a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage; but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself."²

However, we can be receptive to the renewing and transforming power of the Holy Spirit by getting our house in order by using all the human effort we have. We know that human effort alone is not enough but we can prepare the house, as Emily Dickinson would say, to be "haunted." When I use the word haunted, I mean to be filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps some of you remember the quote from the movie, **"The Field of Dreams"** starring Kevin Costner. As the young man begins the process of building the baseball field in the Iowa cornfields, he is told, "If you build it, he will come." That same principle is at work in our spiritual life and pilgrimage as we prepare to have a house (our bodies) filled with the presence of God. We are more than dust – we are spirit-filled dust.

The spiritual writer, Frederick Buechner once wrote, “If it seems pretty depressing to start the Lenten season asking important questions of our lives and what are the values we are cultivating, just remember that while we start with the biblical imagery of ashes and sackcloth, be also reminded that the joy of Easter and the eternal can be found at the end of this challenging journey.”

Tonight, we start with the ASHES. I plead with you not to stay there.

Tonight, we acknowledge that we have sinned, but the Good News of the gospel is that we don't have to remain in the state of sin. DR. Fosdick reminds us of this paradox of SIN and GRACE when he wrote, “While we ought not to be the way we are, no person need stay the way they are.” God has acted on our behalf in the person of Jesus Christ to deliver us from living under the power of sin- in order that our lives can be driven by the Spirit of God. We are dust – but we are spirit-filled dust. That makes all the difference in the world. That is why we sing,

**“Breathe on me, breath of God,
Till I am holy Thine,
Until this earthly part of me
Glows with Thy fire divine.”³**

To encourage us to start and go on the journey we further share tonight the Bread of Life and Cup of Salvation. This has the power to transform what eats at us from inside – and be a foretaste of glory divine. Come, sinners, both to this sign of our mortality and the gospel feast.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
February 21, 2007
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ENDNOTES

¹ R. Maurice Boyd, **RUNNING TO PARADISE**, Welch Publishing Company, Ontario, Canada, 1990, page 177.

² C. S. Lewis, **MERE CHRISTIANITY**, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York, New York, first paperback edition, 1960, page 174. C. S. Lewis credits George MacDonald for this insight.

³ “Breathe on Me, Breath of God,” text by Edwin Hatch, third stanza.