

Ash Wednesday

March 9, 2011

Isaiah 58:1-12 & Matthew 6:1-6; 16-21

## Dead Ends and U-Turns

Maybe the most difficult and painfully honest thing we do together in worship is this marking with ashes. It's hard to hear that "We are dust and to dust we shall return." It may be harder still to actually speak those words to somebody else, especially in such a personal way – face-to-face, with a touch. At the end of the day there can be no mistake that we were the ones addressed with fearfully honest word. We are dust. We are human, made of the same stuff as everybody else.

The human journey from womb to tomb is a journey from dust to dust, ash to ash; a journey that, for all its adventure, leads to a dead end. This the confession of this Wednesday of dust and ashes: We are human. We are mortal. For all our attempts at immortality – whether as individuals, families or communities, nations and even religious institutions – we and all our efforts end the same – in dust and ashes, death.

The more grandiose the vision of immortality – a Reich to last 1000 years; an empire on which the sun shall never set; the millennial reign of a crusading church -- the more violence, death and destruction seems to follow. How many must suffer and die so we can live a little longer, a little better?

But in this assembly, we hear the truth about who we are and where we're going. That's the witness of the ash. These ashes don't count to our pious credit. These ashes do nothing for us or for the world. Ashes cannot bring life. These ashes cannot feed or clothe or house or care or hold . Yet, these ashes, which make no distinctions between human beings, tell us a word we and this world need to remember: We are dust and ash – We are human. We are earth people.

But that's not the whole story.

Right about now, there's a turn – in our liturgy, in our lives together, in our hearts, because the truth of "the matter" is God loves dust. God loves what God formed from the dust of the earth, what God lovingly, caringly shaped and molded in God's own image and into which God breathed His own Spirit of life.

We humans commonly think that spiritual practices and religious ritual promise to make us less physical, less material, less connected to this world and more God-like, disembodied, clean and dust-free. Yet we hear Isaiah tell the truth about where God comes to meet us.

God comes to us and walks with us, his beloved dusty, ashy creatures, and God enters into our humanity, to walk together with us, in love.

The witness of scripture is a witness to God's love for what God lovingly made from dust, fragile dust that so easily falls apart. God loves us so much, he sent his Son

Jesus to join us on our journey from dust to dust. For us, Jesus suffered and died at the hands of people like us, scared people grasping for immortality through empire or a disconnected, disembodied religion.

But God raised Jesus from the dead, breathed again the spirit, the life, back into the beloved dust – and Jesus lives. Lives for us.

Here in Jesus' own body and blood given and shed for us God provides the U-turn that leads away from the inevitable dead end. That's repentance – the turnaround and change of direction, change in destination. God turns us around, leads us out of death and into life – a life that's ours as gift to be received not a prize to be won by grasping immortality for ourselves, a gift that's ours as human beings, dying with Jesus.

In Jesus, God has breathes life into death, life into this dust, the dust we are. Dust which now in God's loving hands, becomes beautiful, redeemed, beloved dust, a new creation even now being formed into the image of our Lord Jesus.

You are forgiven. You are loved. You will not die, but in Christ you live, forever, in Jesus name. Amen.