

“Do you not know what the Holy One can do with dust?”

Ash Wednesday~ Feb 14, 2024; St. Matthew's, Sunbury

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From the inside cover of our bulletin, where I often share some information with you about the church season or the service we are about to share together, comes these words: “We are gathered for one of the most important and meaningful services of the church year. *Within the ancient tradition of beginning Lent by being marked in ash with the sign of the Cross lies the invitation to turn our attention to the all-creating and all-loving power of God.* We prayerfully seek God’s ability to heal the brokenness in our lives, as we kneel before God face to face and offer to God all that which has been broken by life- and that which has separated us from God, because only God can make it whole. This turning towards God is the truest work of our Lenten journeys, necessary soul work so we might fully share together in the celebration of our Easter feast, rejoicing in the death that destroys all death and is the birth of new life from that moment and forever.

The language of this service- both our scripture readings appointed for this day (which are the same every year regardless of what lectionary year we are in) and the language of our own liturgical tradition- speaks for us in a kind of back-and-forth, a dialogue we know all too well. Although we sometimes try to forget, we know deep within us that we

are flawed, mortal beings whose earthly life will end AND we cling to God's promises that the One who created us (from something which is generally considered to be worth almost nothing- **dust**) will never leave us- we are never far from God's unfailing care and love **in this world or the next**. From psalm 51, which we will read together shortly: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving-kindness... Wash me through and through from my wickedness and cleanse me from my sin (sin of course being anything that separates us from God). I have been wicked from my birth, a sinner from my mother's womb... **but behold**, you look for truth deep within me, and will make me understand wisdom secretly. The words you hear me say every service just before I celebrate the Eucharist with you come from this psalm: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."

Most of us teeter back and forth with this at some point in our lives, way harder on ourselves than God is on us, crying out: "I am a sinner, I have always been a sinner- but you, God, know the truth and wisdom and all the gifts that live deep within me and can restore me to a healed and cleansed way of being *and I want you to know, God, how much I long for that.*" In other words: **I know all too well everything that has separated me from you, God, but I also know that you can make it right, heal what is broken, make me whole.**" We want this so much, especially in those seasons when we feel far away from God and

so desperately in need of God's grace and mercy and love to flow through us, washing away the debris of our human imperfections and poor choices and returning us back to a place of new growth, of new life, ready to start again, ready to fully believe in God's promises as real and true for us.

From the Litany for Penitence, one of my favorite prayers in the Book of Common Prayer, is some clear and direct language about what it means to be human- both our awareness of our raw and hurt places and our longing for God to make them whole again in accordance with God's mission: **"We confess to you, Lord, all the pride, hypocrisy, and impatience of our lives, our exploitation of other people, our envy of those more fortunate than ourselves, our love of worldly goods and comforts, and our dishonesty in daily life and work...our failure to commend the faith that is in us. Accept our repentance, Lord, for our blindness to human need and suffering...our indifference to injustice and cruelty...our uncharitable thoughts toward our neighbors...our prejudice toward those who differ from us...our waste and pollution of your creation. Accomplish in us the work of your salvation, that we may show forth your glory in the world ...and by the cross and passion of your Son our Lord bring us with all your saints to the joy of his resurrection."**

To hold on too tightly to our despair at “all that we have done and left undone”, as the Prayer Book also says, instead of reaching for all the goodness and new life that comes when we turn towards God and offer up our repentance and our hope is to miss all the meaning of that smudge of ash I will mark on your forehead in just a few minutes. Jan Richardson, who as you know is one of my favorite spiritual writers, puts it like this in some of my favorite words about this day: **“Do you not know what the Holy One can do with dust?”** It absolutely marks us, she says- “but not for sorrow, not for shame, not for false humility or for thinking we are less than we are- *but for claiming what God can do within the dust, within the dirt, within the very stuff of which the world is made.*” It reminds us that everything that binds us, breaks us, separates us from God and from each other is held lovingly by the One who created us so that our life’s longing would be to turn back again and again to claim these promises of full and abundant life- especially in those seasons when everything around us feels as insubstantial as dust, trodden on by the world, ready to crumble into nothingness. “Almighty God”, our Collect says, “You have created us out of the dust of the earth: Grant that these ashes may be to us a sign of our mortality and penitence *so that we may remember that it is only by your gracious gift that we are given everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Savior.*” And in every age the prophets and apostles have implored God’s people:

“Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” **Amen.**