

Ash Wednesday 2006

Sept. 11, 2002. We stood at the edge of the gaping hole that is Ground Zero, exactly one from the day of the attack upon the trade towers and the Pentagon. We had passed through the Church Yard of St. Paul's Episcopal Chapel, with its ancient cemetery shade trees, and emerged to see thousands of people arrayed around the grave like hole that is all that remained of the mighty towers, and the thousands of lives which were lost in their collapse and fire. The huge crowd stood silently, staring, most weeping as a series of prayers were said by Christian, Muslim and Jewish religious leaders. The cool Sept. day was still, but as the prayers ended, and family members of those who died were led down into the hole which is, in fact, a mass grave, a great wind swept in from the sea and whipped up clouds of dust which rained down on all of us who stood in silence to honor the dead. The wind blew the ashes and dust up into the air and it settle on our heads and shoulders and we knew that this dust, these ashes, were in part, the dust and ashes of those whose lives had been so cruelly snuffed out in the attack. And as these ashes and dust settled on us, the words of this Ash Wed. liturgy echoed in our minds. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

We are told in Genesis that God created human kind out of the very dust of the earth. The name Adam, or human, comes from Adamah in the Hebrew, which also can be translated as rich, red, loamy soil, the kind of earth in which things grow. Edward O. Wilson the eminent biologist and writer has said, "Think of scooping up a handful of soil and plant matter from the ground and placing it on a white cloth. This lump of soil contains more order and richness of structure, particularity and history than the entire surface of a lifeless plant the size of earth. It is a miniature wilderness that would take almost forever to explore microscopically. Every species living there is the product of millions of years of history. Each organism is the repository of an immense amount of genetic information. This single handful of soil has about a million fungi, and 10 billion bacteria, dozens of insects, mites nematode worms and other invertebrates. This handful of dust, far from being lifeless, as it appears to the naked eye, and empty, a sign of our mortality, is teeming with life."

Life is a gift from God. So these ashes we receive today ARE and reminder of our mortality, our need to think ever so carefully about how we are living out our lives, using this profound and finite gift of life to serve God by serving humanity. Humanity, our fellow beings made of the dust of the earth. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

The dust and ash that settled on us at Ground Zero included the remains of people black and white and brown; of homeless people and CEO's of companies and faithful fire fighters and police, of men and women, of Christian, Muslim, Jew and Hindu...of rich and poor...all made by God, all loved and still loved by God, without condition. So in the mingled ashes and dust we realized that we are all the same in our common humanity. When I look around this nave, I see the same thing- rich, poor, black, white and brown- Epiphany welcomes us all. The street church you are just starting, the Welcome Table, all the programs that live out the reality that I experienced on that September 11. We are all

God's people. Living or dead, we are God's people. The difference that we might imagine separate us one from the other are really artificial. We might just as correctly say not just that we all belong to the dust, but that we all belong to God. And wonder of wonders, the teeming life in a mere handful of earth, its rich variety and yet common origin, is exactly like the human family- we are richly diverse and wonderfully different, and like our mortality, we are linked together forever through the God who made us. Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

As we enter this 40 days of Lent, we are called to penitence, to think deeply about how we are using this gift of life to serve God by serving God's people. As we heard in the gospel, we get the 40 days from the time Jesus spent in the wilderness, in prayer and fasting, and we also see, being tempted. God took human form in Jesus so that God would know our joys, our fears, our pain, even our death. Jesus was fully God, and fully human...that is, made of the dust of the earth, that same primordial dust of which each one of us is made. And in the ways Jesus was tempted, we can see the temptations in our lives. The temptations Jesus resisted are the ones we today need to resist. He was offered power over others and fame. Are these very worldly temptations like our own? Aren't we tempted to do things we know to be wrong or unkind? Aren't we tempted to put down rather than defend another person just to remain in agreement with those who are popular and with whom we want to hang out? Don't we often selfishly think only of our own needs and not those of our family and friends? Just as we all share common humanity, we all share the common temptations.

The tradition of the Church in Lent also includes giving things up, inspired by the fasting of Jesus. Some give up things like chocolate or meat at meal. Disciplines yes, but do they make a difference to the broken world. what about-

Give up watching TV one evening a week and visit and a lonely or elderly person or volunteering here at Epiphany in one of the programs serving those who have less than we do?

Give up speaking unkindly to others, remembering that we are all dust, brothers and sisters under the skin. Greet people in the lunch room you haven't spoken to before, say a silent prayer for someone you might not even know who looks sad or anxious...I call that one guerilla blessing.

Give up your hatred or dislike of someone you feel may have harmed you or been unkind to you and reconnect with them. End grudges long held, especially grudges against people here at Epiphany...ask someone who has left the church to come back...insist! Tell them they are needed.

Give up 15 minutes each day to pray for peace in the world and other things you feel to be important.

Give up judging people by the color of their skin, their clothes or other superficial things and get to know them. Reach out to those who sit near you in the pews at Epiphany. You

will be, I guarantee, amazed and enlightened to hear their stories, and my guess is they will want to hear your story.

Give up spending money on things which aren't necessities and give that money to the incredible work that Epiphany is doing to help those in need feel valued, loved and cared for as God's people, by God's people. (That would be you!)

This sort of giving up links us to one another in as powerful way as our biology, our common mortality. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Yes, we are dust, but we are made of the very cosmic stardust from which God fashioned the entire universe, the primal elements, the vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns, the planets and this fragile earth, our island home.

We ARE dust, star dust into which the creator of the universe breathed loving life. Remember that too.

Amen.