

Reclaiming Our Dust

Joel 2:1-2,12-17
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
Matthew 6:1-6,16-21
Psalm 103

We gather tonight because it is Ash Wednesday. In just a moment we will hear the perennial words from the liturgy, the words that originate at the beginning of our story way back in Genesis and the words the Psalmist recalls for us. We are made of dust. Our origin is soil. Ashes and dust are linked in Scripture because they both remind us of the ephemeral nature of earthly life. But the first mention of us coming from the ground are in the stories of Creation, when God was making everything new for the first time. In the Genesis account, humans were made in the same story as all the created world, but in the image of God, thereby linking us with the divine authority to co-create and co-protect the world God had just formed. Perhaps you have heard of Paul Tillich, the theologian and philosopher, noted for naming God as The Ground of Being. God is the ground of our ground, the soil of our soil. Our temporal dust, congregated into flesh and bones derives its source, its image, and its creative possibilities from the ground from whence we came. Our earthly lives may be brief, but our purpose and potential in this life and the next are as limitless as the Creator's creativity. But we will only realize that potential if we remain grounded to our ground. The dust itself is not our limitation. If our hearts remember our source, the dust will be our source of inspiration.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he begs the people to be reconciled to God. He names sin as the impediment to righteousness. Sin is a word which Christianity has used in all sorts of confusing ways. According to the Biblical witness, sin is humans distanced from our original design, our identity, our being in the image of God. Groundless. The consequences of humans who live apart from their identity are devastating. Ultimately,

Paul tells us that Jesus bore the consequences of our groundlessness when he was killed. He was murdered for being grounded in God.

A ninth century Irish theologian, named John Eriugena, speak of sin as leprosy. He said that just as leprosy distorts the human face, it leads us to believe that distortion is the true face of the human soul. But it is not. It is a disease. Additionally, leprosy is a disease of quote “insensitivity to what is deepest within us, and more and more we treat one another as if we were not made in the image of God.” According to Eriugena, we suffer from the soul’s forgetfulness and Christ comes to reawaken us to our true nature. Reconciliation to God is a reawakening to what is most true about ourselves and others.

According to our texts, both Paul and Jesus share an understanding of the power of our original design to withstand its opposition. Our strength in this life comes from our groundedness. Ever since sin entered the world, since the first person made the first choice to try to live apart from alignment with God, we have been misunderstanding our problem. We have called the behavior the flaw, rather than the reason for the behavior. Eating the forbidden fruit was a result of humans thinking they could fulfil their greatest purpose and find their greatest joys apart from alignment with God... Human’s made of ground, trying to step off the Ground of their Being.

God’s purposes for us have always been for the health and wellbeing of the whole of creation. It was the first covenant God made with Adam and Eve. Every time we make choices that violate those priorities, we are stepping off our groundedness. Paul lists the hardships we will face from other people in this life if we commit to the servanthood of that original covenant. The world suffers from leprosy, but we can’t be deceived by the distortions of the disease. Gratefully he tells us that even in the midst of what feels cruel and wrong, we will feel the greater truths more deeply. We will feel alive and rich because

we will be living according to our design, not operating from the effects of disease. And we will become part of the creation's healing.

Historically, Lent has been a time Christians dedicate to fasting, prayer, and almsgiving in preparation for Easter. It is the time of year dedicated to becoming realigned with the purposes of God for our lives. Our forbearers took these 40 days very seriously, making and imposing dramatic practices to deeply impress their spiritual priorities onto their physical bodies. Fasting and almsgiving touch the most practical and sensitive areas of most of our lives, our stomachs and our wallets. Laying ourselves bare in that way is a practical method of grounding ourselves in God. These practices prove our trust in pursuing our greatest purposes and joys in God rather than in the things we can control to make us feel safe and our lives meaningful.

These practices continue to have value for us today. But, Jesus warned about the deceitfulness of our hearts to do these things for the wrong reasons. If our practices are about anything other than our alignment with the heart of God, then we are using them as just one more bite from the proverbial apple rather than an opportunity to genuinely reclaim our grounding in God. Refraining from chocolate, coffee, or alcohol probably won't have deep spiritual benefit if they are primarily a dieting strategy. Likewise, donating to charitable causes is always valuable, but is probably not a straight road to spiritual development if we're concerned about the size of the plaque we'll receive honoring our gifts.

The goal of Lenten practices is to limit the things in our lives that keep us from feeling our pull into groundedness in God. Our lives in 21st century America are designed to limit our discomfort or to distract us from it. According to our Biblical authors, until we come into alignment with our design in the image of God, we will feel discomfort in this life. Our

world is marred by the disease of sin and our life in this world draws us to dull the pain of the disease in ways that make us feel powerful and in control. God invites us to feel the pain of the disease, to have our hearts broken by the damage to the beautiful world of God's creation. The invitation of Lent is to rend our hearts, to stop dulling the pain of this world's brokenness long enough to allow God to recreate within us a hunger for the true cure, which is alignment with our original purpose of serving and cocreating this world back into God's design.

The greatest truth about Lent is that God has not gone anywhere. The prophet Joel warns his people against their enemy laughing at them, saying "where is your God" in response to the devastation their people and land were facing. Our land and people also feel the threat of devastation. But God has not gone anywhere. If our people and land are at the risk of threat, it is because the disease of sin is festering. God remains the ground upon which we are grounded, if we will turn from our temporal comforts, slow down to pray, and tune ourselves to hear God call us back. Our rescue and our reward never left; God remains the same. It is for us to return, year after year, day after day, to intentionally position ourselves on our true and living foundation through Christ in God.

Paul says that we may appear to have nothing, but we have everything. What is loss to us is indeed gain. If we desire to experience this truth, we must be willing to have our hearts broken. The truths of the Kingdom of God will always look upside down and inside out because they are true beneath the leprosy. Healing in God is about curing the disease, not just the symptoms.

As we embrace the ashes tonight, may we say yes to the invitation of God. May we have the grace to see ourselves honestly, forsaking the things that keep us from our true

purpose in God. And as we face the brevity of our dusty mortality, may we ground ourselves ever deeper into our true Ground of Being.