



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON EMILY GRIFFIN, CANON VICAR

ASH WEDNESDAY, MARCH 5, 2025

JOEL 2:1-2, 12-17; PSALM 103:8-14; 2 CORINTHIANS 5:20b-6:10; MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-21

RETRACING OUR IDENTITY

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Any idea where that line comes from (aside from the Book of Common Prayer) – the phrase we’ll hear in a few minutes as ashes are placed on our foreheads? It’s from Genesis – the story of Adam and Eve. We’re told there that God made us from the dust of the ground. We know now - it’s not just a metaphor. Scientists believe that our bodies are composed from the dust of exploding stars. We are stardust. Joni Mitchell was right.

This is usually where I start when sharing Ash Wednesday with children – not Joni Mitchell, but how God formed us from dust and breathed into us the breath of life. Why share

this with children? Because we’re rarely this honest about the limits of human life, and our kids need truths they can live into. One year at an intergenerational service, I tried to explain the whole stardust part, but it got lost in translation. One little girl left telling her mom that we’re made of fairy dust. Not really what I was going for. Fortunately, I got to try again the following year – and the year after that. This day comes for us every year. We never stop needing to remember that we are dust.

Eventually, I was able to connect the sign of the cross made on Ash Wednesday on our foreheads to when we’re signed with the cross as we’re anointed at baptism and “marked as

Christ's own forever." When we die, I tell the kids, our bodies return to the dust of the ground – for now anyway. But that doesn't change who we are or who we belong to – we are still Christ's own forever.

This isn't the only time in church when we're reminded of our humble origins. At the end of every Episcopal funeral, we hear words to this effect: "You only are immortal, the creator and maker of humankind; and we are mortal, formed of the earth, and to earth shall we return. For so did you ordain when you created me, saying 'You are dust, and to dust you shall return.' All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song..."

Why use ashes, though? Well, because ashes are what's left after everything else has burned away, and this is what's true of us after every other distinguishing mark has faded – after every success and failure are long forgotten. We are Christ's own forever. That message at least seems to connect with kids. The ashes are not about shame or dirtiness; they're

about retracing our identity, remembering who we are and what we're all made of – whether we're old or young, rich or poor, known or unknown.

On one level, Ash Wednesday is about bringing us all back to earth. If it feels humbling to receive ashes, it's because it's supposed to be. After all, the root of the word 'humility' is humus – Latin for ground or earth. In a culture where we're told constantly to distinguish ourselves, to set ourselves apart from the herd and always be 'better' somehow, it is grounding to remember that we are made of the same stuff as everybody else – and that none of us has unlimited time to make things right.

So, what do we do in response – without falling into the temptation alluded to in the Gospel, of turning even our ashes into a symbol of self-centered pride? I wonder if there's a way to connect this awareness of who we are and what we're made of with the rest of Lent. Because it's not just about how we were formed way back when or what happens when we die;

there's a lot of life in between, and we have choices about how we spend that time – no matter how long it lasts.

Perhaps we can approach Lent this year not as yet another way to prove ourselves, but as a way to deepen our reliance on God – on the One who sustains us with every breath for as long as we live. Perhaps our prayers this season can be more than just requests for strength to tackle our to-do lists; perhaps we could relinquish the pride we take in all our work and ask God instead to help us see how grace is already operating in our lives, to see all the things we can't see when we insist on doing everything ourselves. Maybe we can give things up and give things away this season

not to prove our strength – although such practices can make us stronger, but as a way to remember that our identity is not dependent on what we do – or how successful we are at it - or on how much we own, but on the God to whom we always, already belong. In the meantime, may the ashes today bring us all back to earth. Let them remind us not just that we are dust - but of what is true of us after everything else has burned away, after every other distinguishing mark has faded, every success and failure forgotten. In life and in death, in life beyond death, we belong to God, and we're Christ's own forever. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 *[Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell*

you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."]



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