

Ash Wednesday
February 14, 2018

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

God Loves Dust!

I grew up in central Iowa, just south of Marshalltown, and our house was located on a gravel road. I know many of you, too, reside in homes situated along a gravel road. I really didn't like that gravel road all that much. The dust that was kicked up each time a car sped by and would come in the open windows of our house. Or when I would be out in the yard and dust would blow in my eyes or I would breathe it in to my mouth or nose. It seemed everything was coated with dust. If that wasn't bad enough, I had to constantly dust the house. It seemed like an everyday occurrence. Spray some Pledge on a rag and wipe down the furniture. I hated dust and to this day am still not very fond of it. Even living right next door, in town, dust still seems to gather on tables, picture frames, and window sills constantly needing to be removed. Our society has created a whole host of things we can go and purchase and rid dust from our homes: vacuums with HEPA filters, air purifiers and all sorts of cleaning solutions, products, and gadgets. We can even spray our gravel roads to help contain that dust. And so I ask, does anyone like dust? Can anything good come from dust?

The answer to that is YES. God loves dust! God created our very beings from the dust of the earth as we recall from the second chapter of Genesis. Tonight is about dust or *ash* as the name of this day of the church year, Ash Wednesday, implies. The ashes we will place upon our foreheads are a reminder that we were created from dust and also that in death we will return to dust as it is said, “earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” In many ways, tonight forces us to look upon the frailty of the human condition. We are mortal. We are dependent upon God for life.

I remember going to church on Ash Wednesday as a small child, being led to the front of the church, and standing there as the pastor smeared a gray-black material on my forehead. I had not yet made the connection that these were ashes. I didn't understand what this was all about but what I do recall is returning to the pew with my mother and father and looking around at all the other people and their foreheads. Everyone had that black lower-case “t” smudged on his or her head and by gosh so did I – I was part of something that included even the youngest of children. I didn't understand but I figured it must be important.

And it is. It's important because God loves dust. God has the ability to do with dust what the world sees as simply dust. Dirty. Dingy. Disposable. Not so to God. Dust matters. You matter. All people matter. That is why the dust smeared

upon our foreheads isn't simply some random mark but rather it is marked in what as a young child I perceived as simply a lower case "t." Of course, as I grew I realized this wasn't a lower case "t" but a cross. The cross of Christ, God's Son, in which the church begins its annual 40 day journey toward as it enters the season of Lent. Along the way, the Spirit nudges us to delve deeper into our relationship with God and acknowledge those ways we distance ourselves from God and subsequently from one another. To repent or turn again to the God who saves us through a dirty, dusty cross and a tomb hewn into the soil of a mountainside because simply put: dust matters to God. Life matters to God. All life.

Even those of us who may come tonight and think we are much too dusty to be used or loved by God. Or those of us who may presently or at some point in time felt as if we have been cast aside like unwanted dust upon a shelf; perhaps, from being bullied or abused. Or perhaps, we come simply knowing all too often we fail. Fail to bear the fruit God so desires us to bear, or to hear the cries of the world and respond, or love our neighbor as ourselves, or forgive even our enemies as Jesus calls us to. We may come even viewing ourselves as nothing more than dirty, dingy, ugly dust because that is what we have been told our whole life. But now hear this. God loves dust.

The cross these ashes are smudged upon our heads in remind us God is not done with dust. The empty tomb of Easter assures us of the good news that light will cast aside darkness. Life will once again be brought forth from dust and ash. This new life in Christ is eternal life. Everlasting life. We are dust but God loves dust. Don't let anyone ever tell you otherwise. Amen.