

Ash Wednesday 2020  
February 26, 2020

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

Now I am not a potter and haven't even tried to make anything out of clay for years. But I do have a couple masterpieces I am quite proud of in my office. One I made in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. (Hold up pot) Connected to the base to form the sides of this rounded pot are the letters of my last name: W-H-A-L-E-Y. I recall this taking some time to make. Cutting out the base, smoothing it with my fingers into a circle. Carefully rolling the clay to get each letter the same thickness as the others and then scoring one side with thinly cut horizontal and vertical lines to create texture on what would become my letters created after intricately trimming away at the clay to bring each one into shape. Then came the process of connecting the entire thing together and placing it in a kiln to dry. Yes, it may not be perfectly asymmetrical as some of the letters aren't as tall as the others; but, it's beautiful to me because I carefully made it from my own two hands. It's why I have held onto it these past 30+ years.

Or there's this small round piece of clay (hold up) that sits on a table with a handful of other items that assist me in my life of prayer. It's my sanctuary so to speak where I close the door and talk to the one who formed me from the very clay, I used to form this small round circle of dried out dust and dirt. In the middle of it is a raised cross just as we will shortly have smudged upon our foreheads. This piece isn't perfectly smooth. It has some rough edges, some pits and valleys running through it and the cross is tilted a bit to one side. But, despite its blemishes and seeming imperfections the Holy Spirit can use this sphere of soil to help me draw closer to the one whose hands carefully formed you and me.

I've never given much thought to the process of transforming the soil of the earth into the modeling clay bought in a store to create my two masterpieces. So, I found a video on You Tube and realized it's quite a lengthy process. One must dig down beyond the topsoil until you get to the thicker, moister clay. After placing some of that in a pail, you liberally apply water and mix the two together.

From there, you strain the resulting brownish red liquid from the larger chunks of clay and other impurities. That liquid then sits for a while as the clay settles to the bottom leaving a clear mixture on top, which is drained away. You then pour the remaining mixture into a canvas type of material, wrap it up, hang it out to dry and eventually you have a soft, pliable clay ready to mold into a pot or a sphere with a cross on it or whatever masterpiece your hands form.

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me,” writes the psalmist in Psalm 51 read earlier. This passage that is spoken or sung during worship often in many congregations spoke to me as I prepared for tonight and what this day means as we sing and we pray, as we confess our imperfections, blemishes, and brokenness before one another and before the one who lovingly formed us from the very ash we will soon place upon our heads.

So many times, this evening is a solemn one; at least, in my experience. I have heard many a sermon preached that seems to focus on death more than life. We are mortal beings. Sadly, I admit I, too, in looking back have preached similar sermons. While there is indeed truth in the above; that is, tonight these ashes do remind us of the fact we were created from dust (Genesis 2) and we will return to dust in our death and we are in desperate need of the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ, I wonder, is there more?

Honestly, I don't think any of us need to be reminded about the fragility of life. We so often live it daily. Sunday, I stood and prayed over a beloved saint in the throws of death. Her cheeks sunken in, skin pail, and clinging to her last hours of life, which came the next day. Death and darkness loomed near. No doubt, many of you come tonight facing something similar with a loved one, a friend or even yourself. You come with heavy hearts longing for new life in the face of death. Light amid the darkness. Perhaps, it's not a physical death but rather the stranglehold of addiction, depression, loss of a job, fear of the coronavirus or the dramatic downturn in the markets, guilt, greed, or jealousy that has a hold of your body slowly constricting the life out of you. You long to see the light amid the darkness.

So, we come tonight to be smeared with blacken ash and we pray, we speak and we sing, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." And that is exactly what God does. God heals our aching hearts and souls and restores us to a right relationship with God. God washes away the impurities that harden our hearts and puts within them a new and right spirit filled with the love of Christ. This ash upon our foreheads in the sign of the cross of Christ connects us to the waters of baptism where we were first marked with the cross of Christ. Storied waters of redemption, new life, and new beginnings. Calm waters of salvation. Soothing waters of healing. This cross of dust reminds us Christ enters into and heals our brokenness.

In John's gospels, twice Jesus uses dust to bring about life. In the first, he spits in the dirt and forms mud which is placed upon the eyes of a blind man who is subsequently healed of his ailment. In the second, a woman caught in adultery and facing death by stoning encounters Jesus, who twice writes in the dust of the earth, and saves this woman from certain death and puts before her a new path, a new beginning, a new way of life.

And of course, come Easter Sunday, God raises Jesus to new life after his dead body lay in a tomb hollowed into the side of a hill into the darkness of the dirt. God heals a broken world through the ashes of death and the dust of a tomb.<sup>i</sup>

Tonight, doesn't have to be solemn and depressing; but, rather just the opposite. Wear these ashes upon your forehead and know that God formed you through these ashes. Like a clay pot, God lovingly, carefully, and compassionately formed each of us into a beautiful and precious work of art; even, with our rough edges and perceived imperfections. God's hands dug into the depths of the soil and brought you life. God loves these ashes. God uses these ashes. God creates masterpieces through ashes and dust. You are a masterpiece. You are a beloved child of God.

When you look at your brother or sister in Christ shortly you will see the very same ashes on their brow as are upon yours. The very same cross. Blown away are the dust of differences that divide. Swept aside are the ashes of hurt we have harbored far too long that keep us apart from one another.

Cleansed from the deepest and darkest catacombs of our hearts and souls are the dusty cobwebs of things we have failed to do in order to heed the call from our Lord to be salt and light for the world. And what's left. Clean hearts. Pure and right spirits. Able to see one another as the beautiful dust we are. Just as God sees us. Just as God created us to be.

And so tonight, through these ashes, I remember the beloved saint who died Monday and how indeed she will return to the dust of the earth. But, more importantly, I am reminded of what God can do through dust. Create yet again a masterpiece of new and eternal life. Cast aside the darkness and let the light of resurrection dawn shine for the world to see. Ashes not of death, but rather ashes of hope and life!

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<sup>i</sup> ELCA World Hunger Sermon Starter – Ash Wednesday; Pastor Tim Brown;  
[https://blogs.elca.org/worldhunger/ash-wednesday-sermon-starter\\_2020/](https://blogs.elca.org/worldhunger/ash-wednesday-sermon-starter_2020/)