

***Remember That You Are Dust***  
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**United Church of Strafford, Vermont**  
**March 17, 2019 Second Sunday in Lent**  
**Psalm 27; Genesis Chapters 1-3; Luke 13:31-35**

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” I repeat those traditional words at the Ash Wednesday service as I put ashes on each forehead. They come from the creation story in Genesis (3:19).

It is important that we understand what it means that we are dust. It is the clue to our place in the universe, our true human identity, and much depends on how we see that. Racial, economic and environmental justice, the survival of human civilization, the human race and all living species, all these depend on our self-understanding, the story we tell ourselves to explain our lives, and we will continue on a self-destructive path until we come to a truer understanding of humanity’s place in the universe.

What kind of dust are we? Are we white people’s dust or black people’s dust, Christian dust or Muslim dust? Is one dust superior to another dust?

Genesis says, “God formed the first human from the dust of the ground, and breathed into its nostrils the spirit of life; and the human became a living being.”

Whose dust are we?

We are the dust of God, the Creator, the force of love and life and light that evolved spirit-filled life out of lifeless dust.

Whose dust are we?

We are the dust of the earth that is the corner of the dust of the universe to which humanity uniquely belongs.

My life and your life and all lives on this planet belong to God and to the earth. Everything we are we have borrowed from them, or we have made out of what we have borrowed. Everything we have we will have to return. Everything comes from this combination of God and earth, spirit and dust, so the meaning of our lives is not ultimately about us, any more than the meaning of a book is about the paper on which it is written.

The meaning of our lives is that God is yearning to live through us. The one great ongoing life of the earth is yearning to live through us. We are each a momentary expression of a life that existed long before us and will exist long after us. We are each like one word in a never-ending story, and our life task is to be the truest expression we can be of that unique word of God and the earth that we find within us. Our task is to serve God and the earth with the humility of knowing that all we are is a brief constellation of swirling matter through which God and the earth are living and working toward ends of their own.

And what is that end? Why is it that they have called us into being? What do they want to do through us?

Several years ago Krista Tippett interviewed a research astronomer on her NPR program, *On Being*. Natalie Batalha is a mission scientist with the Kepler Space Telescope searching for earth-sized planets that might harbor life. Her search has led her to profound insights about the universe. She believes that the meaning of it all is love, loving connection, being one with the universe and a portal of it, serving it as we can.

Similarly, when people die for a brief time and come back to life, they often have encounters with a being of light who tells them that the meaning of life is love, and our job is to become wise in how to live and serve the life of love.

Jesus would certainly agree. The two great commandments he gave us were to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and to love our neighbors as if they were our very self. By neighbor Jesus meant not just our friend or family member, but a stranger or enemy, or the birds of the air or the lilies of the field that God created and cared for and saw were good.

Our mission as the living dust of God and earth is to love all God's manifestations and love all the earth, and to promote wise living so that the earth becomes ever more hospitable for all life and ever more like the realm of God.

My family would enact this mission every Sunday when I was growing up. We would walk to church in the morning, which was about the love of God and also the love of the human community gathered there. Then in the afternoon we would go out into the countryside

and visit my aunt, uncle and cousins. We would walk on their farm, loving the beauty and wonders of the earth.

I grew up feeling intimately connected to God, to the land and to the human and natural communities that had lived on that land for thousands of years. So it was devastating whenever we came over one of our beloved hills to see that the valley below us had been turned from fields and forests into the landscape of Mars, a vast, lifeless scene of carved cliffs and rock and rubble where strip mining for coal was taking place.

My family, and especially my uncle, became involved in the effort to require the fossil fuel industry to restore the land after they were done mining it. The requirements would be minimal, but the coal companies told their employees that they would have to shut down the mines and lay everyone off if there were reclamation laws.

Our town became bitterly divided. Old friends would no longer speak to us. My uncle received death threats. Meanwhile the coal companies kept creating high-walls and toxic ponds that will require thousands of years for nature to heal.

Eventually reclamation laws were passed, and of course it was not the end of strip mining, and if anything it increased employment. The industry had been lying to try to keep getting away with its destruction of the earth as profitably as it could for as long as it could.

Jesus was dust of God and dust of earth, like us, and he showed us how to give our dust its greatest meaning. It is to give all we are to serve the cause of love and justice.

The word sacrifice means literally to make holy. We make our dust holy by giving it to the cause of serving God and the earth through our acts of love. We treat our dust as holy when we take good care of our heart, mind, soul and body; but we desecrate it if we dedicate ourselves to our own dust alone.

Jesus said we have to lose our life to gain life. We need to be willing to let go of selfishness and fear. We need to be free to do what God and the earth yearn for our particular configuration of dust to do in our time and place.

We all are given our one true word to speak, we all are given our particular set of gifts to use to serve God and neighbor and the earth and its creatures. We make our dust holy when we use it as Christ did and fulfill the purpose of what we have received.

We make the dust of a congregation sacred by being willing to make sacrifices together, being willing to take risks, being willing to use our collective dust to love the world around us and serve the cause that presents itself to us in each moment of history.

Jesus taught and proved that nothing can defeat us once we have given ourselves completely to living on behalf of our source, because the Spirit of love and light that flows through our dust will never die.

Let us pray together in silence, and I suggest repeating to yourself, “remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return,” and sinking into all the meaning and power and joy in that truth...

### **Lent Insists That We Remember**

tune: Calon Lân 8.7.8.7.D.

text: Genesis 1-3

Lent insists that we remember

That this life is mortal dust.

All we are we must surrender,

All we have we hold in trust.

*refrain:*

Dust to dust, one day returning

What we borrowed at our birth.

And whose dust are we, whose yearning?

Dust of God and dust of earth.

Ours to love, and ours to steward,

Ours to move along its course,

Ours to speak our dust's one true word

On behalf of our life source.

*refrain*

Born to serve like Christ, our teacher,

Called to tend this dust with care,

Serving God and every creature,

Tending waters, land and air.

*refrain*

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