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Dear Friends,

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Those fairly grim words, which accompany the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday, mark the beginning of Lent. This year I was particularly struck by the resonance between some of the symbols of the beginning of Lent and those that come at the end.

Feet Most striking is Jesus washing his disciples’ feet on Maundy Thursday. In the Gospel of John, that foot washing, not the sharing of bread and wine, is the central act of the Last Supper.¹ So at the beginning of Lent we have the sobering reminder that we are dust, and as a mark of that element of our identity, we have ashes placed on our head. And at the end of the season, we see Jesus washing away the dirt and dust from his disciples’ feet.

Humility is a theme of Lent, and the word comes from the same root that gives us “humus,” a term for rich soil. To be humble is to be close to the ground, and to be “humiliated” is to be brought low. In the Roman Catholic liturgy of ordination to the priesthood, candidates prostrate themselves on the floor of the church—they “humiliate” themselves as a reminder that their authority comes in no way from their own merits, but is entrusted to them by God. They may offer God’s grace, but it is never their own. We are, after all, dust, and to dust we shall return.

What do you mean I’m “dust”? In a culture which extols the positive self-image and sets feeling good about one’s self as among the highest goals, going around and telling people that they are dust, or simply meditating on that as it applies to one’s self, strikes a discordant note. Part of the meaning of Jesus’ washing feet at the Last Supper may be to show to the disciples (who are all about to abandon him, which, probably, he knows even as he washes their feet) that he loves them because of who he is, not because of who they are.

¹ (John places Jesus’ comparison of bread and wine to his body and blood in the middle of his ministry at the feeding of the 5,000 in the wilderness in chapter 6 of his Gospel. It is that section of John which provides the text for the hymn “I am the bread of life.”)

If to be loved we have to be worthy, sin, failure, and error are going to be especially worrisome. If we have to earn the love of God, or of anyone else, we will naturally seek to highlight those things about us which we think might evoke love, and we will do our best to hide, obscure, or deny anything which is less commendable. Since there are always things about us which do not merit praise, if we have to earn love we will always be anxious: what if everything I know about myself were generally known?

After Adam and Eve disobey God, one of their first instincts is to hide from him (Genesis 3:8). As a strategy for looking good, that was as futile then as it is now. Imagine a young child thinking that he might disappear by covering his eyes, and you get some sense of how this approach might appear to God. We remind ourselves at the beginning of the Eucharist (p. 323) that God is the one to “whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid.” Despite our instinct to put on the equivalent of our best makeup to stand before God, the effort is pointless. Or maybe even worse, because it suggests that we can present to God something other than who we really are. And we are, after all, dust.

But it's not my fault One could argue that it is not our fault: If God made us, then whose fault is it that we are the way we are? We could be more perfect, we might argue, if only God had made us that way. And I suspect that underlying that argument is the view that to be loved, we must be really good, preferably all the time. If God made us dust, how can God blame us for being what we are?

But, of course, God does not blame us. At the Last Supper Jesus does not go around comparing feet and praising those whose feet are clean and well-groomed and criticizing those whose are less attractive. Lent begins with a sign of humility applied to that which is highest about us (our heads) and of which we are the most proud (think of the attention we devote to our faces and heads looking as good as we can make them). And as Lent comes to an end, Jesus takes in his hands that which is lowest about us, our feet, and sets about cleaning, restoring, and comforting them. He does not wash faces at the Last Supper; he does not do the first century equivalent of straightening a tie, checking a hem, or making the last arrangement of hair. Our worth comes not from our appearance, or, by extension, our reputation. By washing feet Jesus is showing that our being loved and cared for by God originates with God, not with us. It is OK to be dust because our being loved does not depend on our being anything else.

What do you suppose it means that what Jesus washes off at this point is the dust that clings to us?

And the washing of the feet prefigures Jesus going to the cross. Jesus takes on the sin of the world because he has a passion for reconciliation. Perhaps among the many meanings of the cross is that it shows that Jesus would give us all that he had, not because we were good and deserved it on our own merits, but because he knew we thought ourselves unworthy and only by this act could he show that worthiness was not a precondition for being loved by God. As Paul writes in the Epistle to the Romans (5:8), Christ died for us while we were still sinners. Jesus goes to the cross not to reward anyone for being good, but so that all of our shortcomings need not be a barrier to our feeling—and knowing—that we are loved by God.

Love and merit And once we experience that God loves us apart from any merit of our own, we can, growing out of that personal experience, begin the hard work of unlinking love and merit in our own lives. We can grow a bit into the full stature of Christ when we can begin to offer love because it is what someone needs, or what a situation calls for, rather than because it is deserved.

So, paradoxically, embracing our identity as dust enables us to experience the true magnitude of God's grace and mercy, and that, in turn, can make us generous to others. Perhaps washed by Jesus, we need not be quite so dusty. If, on the other hand, we think that we are pretty good on the basis of our own character and accomplishments, then God's (or anyone else's) love would become a reward for virtue. In that instance, less virtue would deserve less love, and so those whom we view as less worthy, for whatever reason, we would not need to love, or at least not quite as much, and certainly we would not expect God to love them.

And yet Jesus in the Gospels is always loving the unlovable, and his most strained relationships are with those who think well of themselves. When we begin to identify with all of those crippled, blind, scorned, and outcast beneficiaries of Jesus' love and blessing, these stories indeed become good news. When we place ourselves in the company of those who are needy and know it, we become part of the group Jesus seeks out and with whom he abides. I wonder if Jesus realizes that those who see no need for what he has to offer are unlikely to benefit from what he has to give. The issue is not whether we need what God offers—we all need the love and healing of God—but whether we have figured out that this is exactly what we need. To pick up on the Gospel stories of this season, will we realize that we need a new birth, that living water is what we require, and that ordinary bread will not sustain extraordinary life.

We do not get to choose whether we will be dust or not. We are. It is how we are made. What we do get to choose is whether we will be honest about who we are. If what we most desire is to be loved, honored, and respected, we are more likely to achieve that goal if we give up the hope of earning it.

Paul says it this way in a deservedly famous passage from the Epistle to the Philippians (2:5-8): “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”

Two strategies for a kingdom Jesus humbled himself; he let himself be humiliated. He was being treated like dirt. He was dust. The Romans lifted him up from the earth on the cross to be a spectacle of death and fear—a reminder of what they could do to anyone who fell afoul of their power and good opinion.

I imagine God thinking something like, “OK, you want to see ‘lifted up’? You want see ‘spectacle’? You want to see what real power does when it seeks to show its scope and nature? Just wait....”

For Easter and the Resurrection are God's response to crucifixion and death. If Rome, or any empire, seeks to maintain its kingdom by the fear of death, God proclaims that his kingdom will be defined by the bestowing of life. If Rome lifts up death a few feet from the ground so the crowd can see and be intimidated, God lifts the resurrected Jesus up above all the earth so that everyone can see and be encouraged. Rome says, Look what we can do to you who are dust, and be terrified. God says, Look what I will do with you who are dust—be amazed and rejoice.

Homework assignment Well, I am anticipating the end of Lent by a few days in writing this now. And since Bible study is a traditional part of Lent, let me leave you with just one verse to read and perhaps commit to memory this season. It is from the Second Epistle of John and is one of my favorite lessons for funerals. I like this verse because it brings together honesty about ourselves with the truth about God, and it offers that deep, true, and lasting hope which that combination produces:

Beloved, we are God's children now.

What we will be has not yet been revealed.

What we do know is this:

when he is revealed,

we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. (*1 John 3:2*)

We are dust, and that is true. But being dust is no cause for shame or fear, for we are also God's children—now—and as God has raised and exalted Jesus in order to make clear and plain God's will and power, so God will do the same for us. Not because we are good or because we have done any good works, but because it is God's will and purpose that all creation should be gathered together and restored to a holy harmony, and the almighty God overcomes whatever barriers, to us known or unknown, which may stand between us and the fulfillment of that grand and righteous plan.

Epilogue I suspect that the real challenge in this season is not to believe that we are dust, but to accept that, being dust, we can be loved and be bound for glory. In Lent and Easter especially it ought to be clear that our goal is not to celebrate what good dust we are. We can be honest about who we are because we can be confident in who we will be, and that confidence, in turn, may help us to anticipate now our future destiny to grow into the full stature of the resurrected Christ. Perhaps a more certain experience of the love of God will help us to become more loving ourselves and, through that transformation, may help us to show more clearly God's nature and intent for all of God's creation.

In the very beginning of the story (Genesis 2:7) God breathes his spirit into dust. We are dust, but we are dust to whom God has given his very spirit, and it is the spirit which gives life to what is otherwise just dust. I suspect we get in trouble, we go astray, when we forget or overemphasize either part of that event. We are not God; we are dust. But we are not just dust; God has given us his very spirit and made us in his image. The two end points of the Gospel—the baptism of Jesus and his resurrection—have some resonance with each other and with us. We are baptized into his death and we expect to live in the power of his resurrection (BCP p. 306). Perhaps the washing away of the dust which begins in baptism points toward that corresponding washing at the Last Supper. Maybe that as the first washing prepares us for our new life here, that final washing may do the same for our life to come.

Well, we are dust, but we are earthen vessels with a heavenly treasure, a heavenly Spirit, within. As we come to the great meeting of dust and spirit, of death and life, in Holy Week and Easter, may you come to a deeper understanding of who God has made you to be here and of what you have been made to become hereafter.

The Rev. Canon John G. Hartnett