



March 2016

Volume 89 Number 3

Dear Friends,

One of the great breakthroughs of the latter part of the 20th century was the development of hospice care for those close to death for whom no other outcome seems reasonable to expect. In a few decades we have gone from having very few resources to offer patients and their families at that point to now having large networks of highly trained, skillful, and compassionate professionals who minister not only to the one approaching death, but also to their families and loved ones who are on that journey with them.

Lent and limits I wonder if that more honest understanding and accepting of our mortality need be deferred to the point where all other options have been driven from consideration. Perhaps paradoxically, I wonder if our lives would be richer if we made peace sooner with the unavoidable fact that, at least in the form with which we are most familiar, they will not go on forever. What if a kind of freedom is to be found by recognizing and acknowledging limits rather than acting as if they do not exist. Marriage may be the most familiar application of this principle, but I suspect it is not the only one.

Part of what drives this line of thought is wondering if we might find death less fearsome if we devoted a little more attention to it throughout our lives. I wonder if all the death we see in popular media might reflect a desire on some level to engage the issue more deeply and directly than conventional methods seem to offer.

My sense is that at funerals we often have many non-churchgoers in the congregation. Perhaps some—or even much—of the motivation is to pay final respects and to support the family of the deceased, but my sense from conversations afterwards is that there is also an entirely understandable hunger to address the meaning of our mortality and how we face it in ourselves and in those we love. As a priest I am deeply aware of how little we can do in the hour we have in a funeral. And, as members of the congregation come with less and less background in the Christian understanding of the nature of life and death, the limits of that hour become more painfully obvious to me. There just is not enough bandwidth in the single liturgy of a funeral to transmit even a significant portion of the genuinely useful resources we have.

Ashes, ashes we all fall down We begin the season of Lent on Ash Wednesday when we offer the imposition of ashes “as a sign of our mortality and penitence.” And this liturgy is one element of the range of resources we have to offer. As often happens in the Church, we do not have a separate category for “end of life issues” as if those could be addressed in isolation as a separate checklist to be worked through. Certainly the ashes evoke death and mourning, but they also offer a testimony about our fundamental identity. Death does not intrude upon our lives; somehow it is always an element in them.

The ashes are imposed with these words: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Within the context of the larger liturgy, with its reading of Psalm 51 and the powerfully specific and often uncomfortably thorough Litany of Penitence, the ashes become not a shallow observance of a traditional custom, but a profoundly nuanced symbol of a deeply counter-cultural understanding of human nature and our individual identities.

We are not God, not even gods, we are dust. We are not inherently good, beautiful, or clever. We are not “like” dust, nor do we perhaps share some few peripheral minor characteristics with dust, but we “are” dust. Part of what makes that initial declaration so important is that it establishes our relationship with God as people who receive God’s love, gifts, and blessings not because we are worthy, but because God is loving, gracious, and generous.

If we have to depend on our own resources for well-being, at some point, and maybe at many points, they will fail. We will do badly at something we value; we will betray others and ourselves; we will lose someone or something that deeply matters to us—you can read The Litany of Penitence (Prayer Book, p. 267) or even The Great Litany (p. 148) for a more complete list. More on that at the end.

Affluence and its discontents One of the odd downsides of affluence in a technologically sophisticated environment is that those blessed with resources can begin to believe that they—we—can have whatever we desire. If we work hard enough, and are gifted enough, or maybe if we are lucky enough, and especially if we belong to a demographic group with traditional privileges, we can come to believe that life has few hard limits. My sense is that in human history this is a rare and recent state. There is, indeed, something wonderful about the American dream—and I wish it could be extended to everyone of any nation. But believing that it offers a full understanding of what makes for a good life is, alas, personally impoverishing and communally crippling. Limits, especially when we experience them ourselves, remind us to be humble. They remind us that we are dust.

Two dangers To believe we are dust but not to know that we are loved by God is a crushing burden. One argument I hear against using these images and vocabulary is that “people need to be encouraged, not made to feel even worse about themselves.” That argument goes on to add affirmation to praise and to look askance at anything that might diminish our sense of being fundamentally good.

But if we are dust, then those efforts to build up self-image are not only untrue, but they are deeply hurtful. For on some level either we actually know that we are dust and are torn between that inner knowledge and the need to convince ourselves and others that we really are OK, or else we think we are not dust at all and are, therefore, entitled to seek whatever we want because we are such worthy, or even superior, beings. In the first instance the danger is depression, despair, and the various improvisational coping strategies we devise to secure even the briefest escape from that psychic pain. Even when we know, and not everyone does, that such strategies simply dig the hole deeper, we too often pursue them because how we feel in the moment so very, very painful.

And in the second instance, with its categorical denial that we are dust, the danger is narcissism, grandiosity, a gluttonous relationship to resources and even people generally, and finally manifests itself in a kind of psychopathology (which is a disorder, as the word suggests, of the psyche, the spirit).

Ashes and the one-night stand Part of the power of the ashes is that they confront the complexity of our identity and fundamental nature head on. [Or, I suppose, “on head” if one wants to be more literal about the ashes’ application.] The ashes do not make us “dust”—we are that already. The only question is whether we will engage the truth about our nature.

So not receiving ashes does not make us something other than the dust we are. “I gave up going to church because I didn’t want to think of myself as dust…” does not actually effect a change in our nature. “Dust” is not something that only applies to Christians who believe in this sort of thing, so you cannot avoid it simply by opting out of church. Spending Sunday morning elsewhere may reduce how often you hear about how we are dust, but it does not change the fundamental nature of our identity. So, do you want to go with facing the way things are, or with trying not to think about it because to do that is uncomfortable and difficult?

The ashes in the Christian tradition (and as a symbol ashes are certainly not unique to Christians) offer us a vehicle to address the deep truth about ourselves. And because this truth is complicated and maybe even difficult, the liturgical context—Biblical readings, preaching, prayers and reflection together in a congregation with others who acknowledge being in the same situation—is an essential element to the respectful use of the symbol. The offering of the ashes without the accompanying context suggests to me either a superficial understanding of the symbol or a belief that somehow the complexity will be conveyed by the physical act. Not exactly the liturgical equivalent of a one-night stand, but close. The fact that some people might really like it (either ashes or the one-night stand) does not seem to be a compelling argument to take the action out of the larger context.

Yet even at the grave And to dust we will return. Dressing up our dust, physically or metaphorically, has no lasting benefit—we all, as the funeral service reminds us, go down to the grave. Yet even at the grave, that liturgy goes on to proclaim, we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia. (Prayer Book, p. 482-3)

Whenever I read that in a funeral, I always want to stop and have a longer conversation about what we have just said. Because we tend to think that “alleluia” is a spontaneous expression of joy and delight, and I do not think I have ever had those feelings at that point in a funeral liturgy.

But my understanding is that “alleluia” is better understood as “God be praised” than as “hooray.” We praise God at the grave not because we feel happy, but because we remember that we are not just dust, but dust beloved by God, and, even in the valley of the shadow of death, that God walks with us. And at this point, at the grave, we have no choice but to recognize that any hope founded on our “dust” is going into the grave with the dust. But hope founded on God—God’s love for the one who has gone from us but who has not gone from God, as well as God’s love for us—is indeed something for which we may give thanks and praise even—or especially—at the grave.

This section of the funeral comes near the very end of the liturgy. Near the very beginning, if I am the Officiant, I read as I walk down the aisle, “For none of us liveth to himself, and no one dieth to himself. For if we live, we live unto the Lord; and if we die, we die unto the Lord. Whether we live, therefore, or die, we are the Lord’s.” (Prayer Book, p. 469, quoting Romans 14:8). We are dust, but we are the dust into which God breathes God’s very own spirit, and the result is a life which is not

dust. Life does not come from the dust, but comes from God, so whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. We are not the Lord, but we are the Lord's, and that is quite good enough.



We begin this season reminding ourselves that we are dust—that declaration is among the first of the words of Lent in the Ash Wednesday liturgy. And when Lent is over, at that precise point in the Easter Vigil when we go from darkness to light, from Lent to Easter, the first word we say is “Alleluia.” Perhaps our biggest challenge is to keep both of those words, “dust” and “alleluia,” constantly before us in creative tension. For if we skip over the “dust,” we deceive ourselves, but if we forget “alleluia,” we fail to understand God and God's relationship to us. It is the “alleluia” which makes facing “dust” possible.

In the few weeks of Lent that remain to us, I invite you to have the courage and the honesty to consider how we—how you—are dust and what that means. If you want something more concrete, read “The Litany of Penitence” from the Ash Wednesday service, maybe each Wednesday until Holy Week, then every day until Easter (p. 267 or just google it). You might also read “An Exhortation” (p. 316). And maybe read through The Great Litany (p. 148), this time keeping those two words, dust and alleluia, as something like the lens through which you look as you read.

I invite you also to have the courage and honesty to consider who God is, how God relates to us, and what that means. Further reading suggestions include “The Decalogue” (p. 317), the Absolution and Comfortable Words (p. 332), and The Prayer of Humble Access (at the bottom of p. 337).

And I suggest treating these readings more like exercise routines than as sources of information. Read them regularly, preferably at a fixed time every day, so that the deep and complex meaning behind the words may sink in and gradually unfold within you. These words, when repeated regularly, do some of their best work in your unconscious—give them the opportunity to show their stuff.

The Episcopal Church, at its best, understands holy symbols and holy words and uses them carefully and with respect so that the power they contain may become accessible, on multiple levels, to those with whom they are shared. And if you sometimes wonder what value there may be in investing the time and energy which active membership in the Church requires, remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

The Rev. Canon John G. Hartnett

Rector