

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

March 1, 2017  
Ash Wednesday

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17  
Psalm 51: 1-17  
2 Cor. 5:20b-6:10  
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

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When I was little I loved to make mud pies. I had an old tin set of cookware – little pots and pans and dishes and cups perfect for long hours playing make believe. I kept my kitchen set in my grandmother’s shed and all summer long I would bring them out day after day and set up an imaginary bake shop in the old well house behind her home. The well house didn’t have a roof – all that was left were three cinder block sides and an old wooden door. It was just high enough for me to look over. On top of the capped well sat two cinder blocks on their side which made a perfect imaginary oven.

On those long hot summer days, with mosquito bites on my legs, dirt under my finger nails, and my hair haphazardly put up in a ponytail I would enter my kitchen ready to go to work. On hand was a bowl of dirt from the driveway and a small pitcher of water. From there I would begin mixing my mud pies. I would mix just the right amount of water into the dirt to get a thick consistency and then I would pour the mud batter into the tin pans and carefully place them into my cinder block oven.

In a few minutes, I would proclaim them done and I would pull them out of my make shift oven and marvel at my creation. They were beautiful.

As I got older, I played less and less with my old tin cookware. I didn’t like getting dirty and the magic seemed to slip away from the cinder block oven. Suddenly, it was more important to be a little more presentable, to make sure that no one saw dirt under my nails.

It’s funny how as a child, we know instinctively how to embrace the dirt, to glory in our messiness, and to make something out of that mess. But as adults, our willingness to sit with the dirt becomes a bit harder. We want others to see only those parts of ourselves that are clean and polished, well put together and curated into a happy whole.

Yet, today on Ash Wednesday, we come to get dirty again. And with our souls ready, and our hearts open we embrace our messiness and allow ashes to run down our faces and we will walk out of here today letting go of our desire to be a perfect image of togetherness. Instead, we walk out of here willing to say, I am broken and messy and in need of Jesus.

It reminds me of this poem that I come back to every Ash Wednesday...

**Blessing the Dust**  
**A Blessing for Ash Wednesday**

All those days  
you felt like dust,  
like dirt,  
as if all you had to do  
was turn your face  
toward the wind  
and be scattered  
to the four corners

or swept away  
by the smallest breath  
as insubstantial—

Did you not know  
what the Holy One  
can do with dust?

This is the day  
we freely say  
we are scorched.

This is the hour  
we are marked  
by what has made it  
through the burning.

This is the moment  
we ask for the blessing  
that lives within  
the ancient ashes,  
that makes its home  
inside the soil of  
this sacred earth.

So let us be marked  
not for sorrow.  
And let us be marked  
not for shame.  
Let us be marked  
not for false humility  
or for thinking  
we are less  
than we are

but for claiming  
what God can do  
within the dust,  
within the dirt,  
within the stuff  
of which the world  
is made,  
and the stars that blaze  
in our bones,  
and the galaxies that spiral  
inside the smudge  
we bear.

How often do we take time to bless the dust of our lives? To bless the places that are scorched, the places we have felt sorrow and shame, the places that we would rather sweep under the rug, into the darkness instead of exposing them to the light?

It's an interesting challenge – to bless the dust. We are often taught to hide our pain, to not talk about it, to judge ourselves and others for the mistakes we have made. We don't want to linger in our brokenness much less share it with others as if to hang our dirty laundry out for the neighborhood to see. We too often believe that this dust is useless, worn out, and unwanted. But, did you not know what the Holy One can do with dust?

The ashes for Ash Wednesday are an incredible symbol of the value of our dust - the value of each and every experience that created who we are today. The experiences where you have struggled with the dust wondering if it was worth God's love and mercy. Wondering if you would heal, wondering if you could start anew.

I invite you this Lenten season to embrace your dust. To allow your heart to open to forgiveness and healing. To acknowledge where you have failed, where you need to change, where you need to allow God's grace to wash over you and cleanse the dark places you have tried so hard to hide. Remember...Lent is a journey. Our healing may take time. Our willingness to accept our brokenness may be hard. But, today we let the ashes fall on our face and we humbly allow others to see while we at the same time boldly call to God...here I am Lord. Have mercy on me. Amen.