
Pardon Our Dust

A sermon by the Rev. Canon David Boyd
Ash Wednesday

Pardon our dust!

You've seen the sign before; hanging in front of a construction site, stuck to the wall of a store under renovation, or perhaps posted in a church hallway when some new project gets underway! It's an apology (sorry you are being inconvenienced), but it's also an explanation: things are being made new! But in the meantime, expect a mess.

What's worse is a sign reading "Pardon our Dust," that has collected dust! The sign hangs up for too long and nothing really changes. The scaffolding stays up, the dust remains, but no real renovation happens. Sometimes, it's easier to put up a sign than to do the hard work of transformation.

Dust itself isn't the problem; after all, we are dust! But we are ordered dust, shaped by God's hands and breathed into life. The issue is where the dust settles and whether it still reflects God's good design. To be clear, dirt and dust aren't bad in themselves. In fact, they are absolutely essential! Dirt in its natural habitat gives us everything we need: food, trees, flowers, a place for life to grow and flourish. And yet, the same dirt that grows our food becomes a problem when it gets tracked inside. We don't like dirt very much when it's on our floorboards or in our water. Dirt is good in the field, but it's a problem in the house.

What makes something harmful is not its substance, but its disorder. Blood is sacred inside the body, but outside it signals harm or death. Fire in a fireplace is warmth and hospitality; fire in the walls of your house is abject destruction. Water in a river is life-giving; water flooding the streets is chaos. This is the difference between the sacred and the profane, the holy and the unholy; evil is a problem of position, of order. Disorder, things being in the wrong place, is where the trouble begins.

Our Ash Wednesday tradition places dust at the center of things, not just as a symbol of our mortality, but as a reminder of what we were made to be, and where things have gone astray. It is an image of not only what we are, but of what might be restored. "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return." That's not a curse but a truth; we are creatures of the earth and one day we will return to it. "Dust to dust" is also an invitation: an invitation to renew what has decayed, repair what is broken, and reconcile what has been cut off.

The prophet Isaiah extended this invitation to the disordered world in which he lived, marked by hypocrisy, self-serving piety, injustice, and oppression. Society was mis-structured: elites worshiped in their vaunted temples while the poor and marginalized were kept at a distance. The rituals looked ordered, but their relationships were in disrepair. These ancients thought that the dust itself, the ritual, the appearance of devotion is what matters.

But Isaiah declares that true fasting isn't just smearing dust on yourself; it's clearing out the dust that clogs the lives of the oppressed, the hungry, the homeless. "You shall be called the repairer of the breach," he says. You will be the ones who build, who restore, who renovate what is broken, bringing near those who have been pushed far away.

Jesus, in Matthew's Gospel, challenges a similar problem. The people he addresses are not so different from those in Isaiah's time, not so different from our time... they are engaging in acts of devotion while allowing injustice and division to persist. Jesus echoes Isaiah: performing acts of piety in public but doing nothing to restore broken relationships and broken systems does not please God! It's no good to hang up a sign that says "Look how holy we are!" as if appearances alone can complete the work of transformation.

Just as Isaiah rebuked those who made a show of fasting while neglecting the poor, Jesus admonishes those who make a spectacle of faith while ignoring its substance. True renovation of the soul requires more than signage; it demands the hard work of clearing out pride, self-interest, and complacency. When worship becomes a performance rather than a posture of sincerity, it loses its power to restore. When dust lingers, not as a mark of honest reflection, but as a veil obscuring the deeper relationship God calls us into, we miss the mark.

Ash Wednesday reminds us that we are both of the dust (finite, earthly, in need of grace), and the ones entrusted to tend to the dust, to participate in God's good work of renewal. The ashes we receive today are a sign of our mortality, yes, but they are also a sign that we are under renovation. "Create in me a clean heart O God, and renew a right spirit within me" (51:10). Amidst the commotion of daily life, our hearts accumulate dust, quietly and unnoticed, until the dust obscures what was once clear. Devotion can become routine, its vibrancy dulled by habit. Good work can be left unfinished, not by intention, but by the slow accumulation of distraction and neglect. Over time, what was once a body of prayer, a heart of compassion, and a life of justice can need rejuvenation. Pardon our dust, we pray. God, sweep away what does not belong and restore me to the fullness of who I was made to be.

The good news is that God is at work in us, repairing, restoring, reshaping us. God does indeed pardon our dust! We are being made new. And like any substantial project, any big build, that transformation takes time. The life of faith is a process, a renovation that takes time and intention. Lent is a season of movement, an opportunity to realign ourselves with the justice, mercy, and love that God calls us to embody. Justice belongs in our daily lives, not just in our prayers, shaping the way we walk in the world. Mercy belongs in our actions, not just in our words, guiding our interactions with others. And the grace God has given us belongs at the center of who we are, not as an abstract concept, but as the very force that makes transformation possible.

But let's not just leave up the sign. A sign alone doesn't change anything; it merely signals that change is needed. The real work is in the clearing, the restoring, the rebuilding. Lent invites us into this work, not just for 40 days, but as a pattern for life. We are not meant to remain stagnant, to let the dust of distraction and complacency settle. We are called to movement, to growth, to renewal.

And we do not labor in vain. The dust we bear today is not the final word. Already, we anticipate that day when death will be undone in the resurrection of Christ. The cross is a seal, a promise of sanctification, of dust remade, of life restored. May God clear out the dust that doesn't belong and form something new in its place. Let our fast be one that restores, that realigns, that makes room for God's holy presence.

So, pardon our dust! We are under construction!

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