
Remember That You Are Mud

**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler
Ash Wednesday – Year B**

I regret that our tradition has adopted the title, “Ash Wednesday,” for this day. This holy day is not supposed to be called “Ash Wednesday.” Our gradual adoption of that title is really just another unfortunate penitential maneuver of the middle ages. I admire some of the brilliant, positive, features of medieval Christianity, but its sunken descent into penitential Christianity is an aspect that I do not respect.

Penitence is fine, and often necessary. But the power of this day is not about ashes. The power of this day is about dust. The power of this day is dirt. The power of this day is mud.

The scriptures are clear. The scriptures are as clear as mud. The word for the first human being, “Adam,” comes from “Adamah,” which means “Ground,” “Earth.” So it is that at Genesis 3:19, the Lord God declares to Adam, “you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Those are the words which the priest repeats as she or he smudges our foreheads this day. Thus, I would rather this day be called Dust Wednesday. Or Earth Wednesday. Or even Mud Wednesday.

Today is about dirt. From the primal clay, God formed first humanity, named Adam. God shaped humanity from the dust and dirt – and water, too—molded the slippery mud into clay, and breathed the spirit of life into us. We humans, then, are the result of Godly creativity, and fertility, and grace. We enjoyed an innocent and equal life with God, in the garden.

But, as we all know, Adam –first humanity– somehow abused the grace of the garden. He reached up and grabbed what was not his to grasp. He took hold and seized something, that fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We began to experience suffering, sin, and death. It was a fall, we say, but it was also rather like a rise, a growth from innocence into maturity. Now, we realize good and evil, and sin and suffering, and we struggle for grace. The struggle is worth it; the growth in grace is worth it. Many people call this fall a “fall upwards.”

Into this fallen world, another character is born: the person of Jesus, whose life is described so profoundly in Paul’s Letter to the Philippians. In Philippians, chapter two, we read that Christ Jesus was in the form of God, “but he did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped.” (Phil 2.6). This is exactly the opposite action from Adam. Adam did reach out and grasp, seized what was not rightfully his, and so Adam fell. Jesus reverses the action. Jesus, scripture says, “did not count equality with God as something to be seized.”

Instead, Jesus emptied himself, says the poem in Philippians. In fact, the poem continues, Jesus humbled himself. As opposed to Adam’s grasping and clinging upward, Jesus lowers himself. Jesus humbles himself and becomes obedient even unto death.

Jesus humbles himself. Today, forty days before Easter, is about humility. The word “humble,” comes from the Latin word for “humus.” Humus, as any toiling gardener knows, means “good earth.” Or, better, it means “good dirt.”

To be humble means to mingle with good dirt, fertile earth, that which God uses to create the world and to create humanity itself. To be humble means to “get down to earth.” So, the way to relationship with God is not by grasping upward, as the first Adam did, but by lowering oneself, humbling oneself, as Jesus did. Jesus is the second Adam, showing humanity a new way of relationship with God.

Today is the day to get back down to earth. Today is the day to abandon the futility of selfish acquisition and egotistical arrogance. Today, we get back down to earth. God has great things to grow in us, if we can get back down to earth, the fertile earth.

“Remember that you are mud, and to mud you will return.”

When I think of the dirt, from where we humans came, I think of marsh mud. Have you ever seen the deep black mud off the Georgia coast? The mud below the rich grasses of spartina cordgrass? The mud that I used to play in as a child and try to see how far I could sink into it?

It is deep and black. And it is amazingly fertile, rich in organic nutrients provided by the decay of spartina and plant matter, full of tiny organisms and so many fish, washed twice daily by the rise and fall of the tides. Go down to the Georgia coast and you can smell that mud from miles away.

On Ash Wednesday—sorry, I mean Mud Wednesday—you can smell that mud even here, even here in the pristine glistening of church.

Some people call that marsh mud “pluff mud.” It is thick, slippery stuff, very black and very sticky.

Apparently, the reason it is called “pluff mud” is because the word was first spelled like the word “enough.” Just as enough is spelled “e-n-o-u-g-h,” so pluff was spelled “p-l-o-u-g-h”.

Now, the word “p-l-o-u-g-h” is another way to spell the word, “plow,” that tool that farmers use to dig through the dirt. You can spell it “p-l-o-w,” but you can also spell it “p-l-o-u-g-h.” When you spell it that second way, it become pronounced like the word, “enough.” Instead of “plow,” it gets pronounced “pluff.”

Marsh mud came to be called pluff mud, because it was plow mud, because farmers and cultivators and planters would take some of this marsh mud and mix it in with their soil, making their soil rich and fertile. They realized that marsh mud, so deep and black, was fertile; it was plow mud, pluff mud.

That is the mud we remember today. That is the moist dirt, even ashes, that we smear upon our heads today. We are getting down to earth today, remembering that we are dirt. We may remember sins, that is fine; some of us may have a lot to confess. But, even deeper, we remember that we are fertile. We are deep and rich and full of the possibility of life.

Smell that mud! It is not dirty! Today is not a dirty day. It is a rich and fertile day, full of possibility and amazing growth. Amazing growth means amazing grace. That is what today is, Dust Wednesday, Dirt Wednesday, Mud Wednesday, older and wiser than “Ash Wednesday,” as old as the mud on the Georgia coast that is washed and refreshed twice a day by the tide.

Blessed dirt to you today. Blessed Dirt Wednesday. Today, we remember that we are dust, and to dust we return.

AMEN.

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