

“The Good News of Dust”

Isaiah 58:1-12, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
Ash Wednesday

Pastor John Schwehn
Christ the King Lutheran Church
March 1, 2017

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Let me tell you about the worst, and most memorable, job I ever performed.

First, I need to give you a little background. In the year before I went to seminary I worked as a cook in a remote mountain community called Holden Village. Holden is a Lutheran retreat center nestled in a beautiful mountain valley. One of Holden’s core values is ecology and environmental stewardship; surrounded by vast and protected wilderness, it’s a sacred, breathtaking place.

Living at Holden, I became more aware than ever about all of the resources and energy it takes to live in community. I had never before thought that hard about where my drinking water came from, or how the electricity to my house was generated, or where my food waste went. But, because of its remoteness and commitment to stewardship, the answers to these questions at Holden are right in your backyard.

The drinking water is filtered from the cool mountain stream that runs through the valley. All electricity is generated by a hydroelectric plant – an enormous turbine and generator convert the energy of falling water into power for lights and ovens and the dishwasher. All food waste is composted and later used to enrich the many gardens around the village.

So here’s where we get to the worst, and most memorable, job I have ever performed. Because we have to deal with waste at Holden – *all* waste – there came a time when the enormous, underground septic tank had to be emptied. Thousands and thousands of toilet flushes, along with all shower, sink, and kitchen water, finally had to be dealt with. It had been gathering in our septic tank for over a year, and now it needed to be emptied.

Our utilities manager, a 6’ 6” Texan named Steve, figured out a way to pump this stuff from its underground tank into an enormous, 1,000 gallon diesel tank hitched to a truck. The plan was that a crew of us would work overnight to pump out the septic tank, drive it to a Forest Service approved dumping site, dispose of it, and then do it all over again.

So around 2:00 a.m. that morning, it was my turn. I’ll spare you some of the details, but let’s just say that the smell of what was happening is one that I’ll never forget. After the long process of pumping 1,000 gallons of sewage into an old tank, we drove it – slowly – down these long mountain switchbacks, about six

or seven miles outside of the Village. We backed into an old rock quarry, very carefully opened up the tank, attached an outlet hose to it, and then just let it all run out.

We waited in the darkness as a river of sewer water flowed down the side of the mountain. And, as I stood there, covering my nose and mouth, I looked up at the stars above us and was more aware than ever of my place in this vast and marvelous creation. I thought about how all of our labors, all of this late night work, was in the service of simply returning all of this organic waste back to the earth. It was returning to the place from whence it came.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

These words are so simple, and humbling. On the one hand, remembering our dustiness is a biological fact. These bodies of ours are comprised of atoms and cells, of organic matter from the earth and stardust from the cosmos. These words return us to the basic fact that we are mortal. We, like all dust, are here one day and gone the next.

On the other hand, remembering our dustiness is good news. Because, if that is what we are, how is it that we can experience things like love, forgiveness, mercy, joy, and grief? Though we are dust, God's gift of grace comes to us each and every day, making us new and calling us to holy living.

As we begin this season of Lent, we are invited to consider our dustiness. We are invited to return to the Lord in obedience and repentance. Because, though we are but dust that has been blessed and called beloved by our Creator, we sure are good at believing ourselves to be somehow much more powerful or more in control than this. We worship idols and adhere to ideologies that claim themselves a key to happiness or an answer to mortality. We become fearful of our neighbors – of their dustiness – out of concern for self-preservation, or for the sake of hoarding personal wealth.

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth,” Jesus instructs, “but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

In other words: Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

So, my dusty friends, where then is your treasure? Is it stored up in a barn or a 401k, a piece of property or a set of hoped for political outcomes?

Or, as Jesus says, is your treasure in heaven? In other words, is your treasure stored in a trust and a faith that you – blessed and beloved dust that you are – place in the love of your Creator?

Do you assess your value in net worth, or do you cling instead to the promise that God made to you in baptism: a promise to be with you always, to hold you tenderly in mercy, to call you a beloved child?

My friends, this is truly where our treasure is to be found. Through practices of prayer and repentance, Lent is a season where we discover this treasure all over again. It was never lost, but we may have just forgotten it.

And lest we believe that Lent is a purely *personal* set of spiritual exercises, Jesus – and the prophet Isaiah – have something to say about that, too.

Jesus tells us not to seek personal gain or social reward through public displays of piety. Isaiah warns us against a fast that is only about one-upping the piety of my neighbor or looking miserable, as though my fasting and repentance is more intense than your fasting and repentance.

Isaiah goes on. God speaks these words through his prophet: Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?"

That septic tank job – while I will not seek out doing it again – it was its own sort of spiritual practice in the Isaiah sense, because it connected me even more intimately to my community and to the earth. It opened my eyes to my participation within the body of Christ, to my baptismal calling that I, in the words of the prophet Micah, must “do justice, love kindness, and walk *humbly* with God.”

My friends, we are dust and God is good and gracious to us. Though we are mortal, though we will fail and hurt and grieve, though our own dusty bodies fail us and limit us, we are nonetheless called to be a blessing to this earth and to each other.

So come. Receive a sign of your dustiness on your forehead – a cross of ashes. Ashes because they, like us, are made from earth elements of carbon and oxygen. They, like us, are dust. A cross because, as we journey with Jesus through this season of Lent, we will remember that it is in giving ourselves – our dust – away to others that we truly store up our treasure in heaven.

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Thanks be to God.