**Dust You Are**

Based on [Matthew 6:(1-6) 16-21](https://biblia.com/books/esv/Mt6.1)

Preached on February 17, 2021

Ash Wednesday

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Lent is a penitential season. How do we, liturgically sensitive christians, rightly observe such a seasonal shift. Does a person inwardly change their mood or their heart based on something as arbitrary as a date on the calendar? Or is Lent just an outward thing...a ceremony?

If it is just an outward thing, then the words of Jesus today can come at us quite contrary. Ironically, Jesus says when we observe lent (if you will) that we shouldn’t look like we’re observing lent. Still, we should observe lent. Jesus recognizes a time for fasting and feasting. He says elsewhere “**How can the guests fast when the bridegroom is still with them. Soon the bridegroom will be taken from them, and then they will fast.**” There is a time to fast. So how are we to fast, pray, and give without looking like it...and still look like we’re faithfully observing lent?

Well, on Ash Wednesday, we receive the imposition of ashes as an outward confession of our inner sin and mortality. “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Regardless of your mood, or the condition of your heart at the time, the wonderful thing about the imposition of ashes is that it is not a false humility. It’s not a disfiguring of your face to have others admire your struggle. It is simply a mark to express the hidden, or not so hidden, reality that you are a sinner and by your natural strength and power you are dead to God. Somebody can receive the ashes and not mean it...but there’s nothing hypocritical in it. That outward mark makes a true claim about what’s on the inside of all men. It is true to receive the mark of sin because sin is imprinted on our nature.

Receiving ashes on the forehead has been compared to the mark of Cain. Cain’s mark served as a reminder to everyone that, though he was a murderer, no one was to kill him for it, or else God’s judgment would be upon them. “Then the LORD said to him, “Not so! If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.” And the LORD put a mark on Cain, lest any who found him should attack him.”

Of course, a mark imprinted by the very Word of God has a power that a man made ceremony of ash doesn’t. But it is true that, just like the mark on Cain, marking ourselves with a symbol of sin is not for our condemnation. It does not stir up God’s wrath against us. God has marked us as sinners, but promises sinners protection from the assaults of the devil through the mark of grace received in Baptism. The cross of ashes does not put us in God’s crosshairs. He knows our sin already. What is important is that we know it, we recognize it in everyone, and we trust that God not desire the death of the sinner.

Some years back, when I was much younger, I was pulled over for speeding. The police officer came to my window and asked if I knew I was speeding. I remember thinking “well if I’m honest, he’ll honor my honesty”. So I said I did know and was sorry. I admitted my fault and apologized, and he gave me a speeding ticket anyway. If I had been speeding accidentally (or at least had I told him that) he would have given me a pass. But because I admitted my sin, he gave me the ticket. In this and many other such things does the world punish honesty and give a pass to those who would deceive.

God is not like the world; neither is his treasure to be found here. In the Garden, God asked Adam...did you eat of the fruit I told you not to eat? He said to Cain, “where is your brother?”. Did God ask these questions because he didn’t know the answer? By no means. He asked so that Adam and Cain and every other person caught in the act of sin since can have a chance to repent freely, honestly, and trust in His mercy.

The world might punish your honesty, but God rewards an honest answer. He asks if you knew you were sinning in order to forgive you.

Jesus says, “Do not lay up for yourself treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal.” Remember, you are dust you are and to dust you shall return. Do not invest in dust. This body of yours is infected with sin. It is dust, and it will return to dust someday. How much are you going to invest in dust? How much time and money are you going to horde and spend tending to dust. You dust your house to get rid of the dust, and Christ will dust the world with a breath on the last day. The ashes of your fallen flesh will not stand in the judgment. People used to live hundreds of years, Moses 120 with vigor unabated. Now people live to around 80 and many times with great frailty. Aging is a reminder that this body will not conquer sin, but sin will conquer it, and the time is drawing nearer. The wages of sin will have to be paid in dust and collected in the ground.

Take care of your body; it is a temple of the Holy Spirit now through baptism and faith. But remember that it is only receiving palliative care. It will die. Only after death, on the day of the resurrection, will Christ raise a new glorious body from the ashes. It will be of the same substance as your former body, only without sin or the stain of sin. It will live in the presence and glory of God and the Lamb forever. Your sins have been scorched in the flesh of Christ, their embers are reduced to ashes so that your soul may be spared in the new day.

So, in living your life here, don’t devote your life to what is dust. Live for heavenly treasure. Do not put on a show of repentance or righteousness, but pray to God that he may hear you, fast so that he may fill you, give so that he may receive. Whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God...not positioning yourself for a place in the world; but patiently waiting for your place in heaven...in the new creation where moth and rust cannot decay and thieves cannot break in and steal. Until then, receive for yourselves the heavenly treasure provided on earth for us, the body and blood of Christ, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. For in this Holy Sacrament, remember that you are Christ’s, and to Christ you shall return.