

Holy Dirt¹
Ash Wednesday February 17, 2010
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The lyric of one of favorite songs by the proto-punk group known as the Stooges begins with this classic line: “Ooh...I’ve been dirt, and I don’t care...”² It is snarled defiantly, but mingled with the defiance there is also a little bit of sadness and maybe even a touch of fear. Sadness because the idea of being dirt—or at least being treated like it—is harsh. Fear because...well, what if it’s true? What if the singer really is dirt? What if we all are? After all, dirt is something we take for granted. We walk on it. We kick it around, and we are always removing it from things—clothes, food, living rooms. Is the same true for us? Are we expendable; something to be removed or trodden on?

Usually when we gather in Christian worship we come together in celebration. We sing hymns, hear God’s word, and pray ourselves into a state of grace and uplift. We encourage our souls to shine and we work on drawing closer to God’s light. Tonight is different. Tonight we look our human nature straight in the face.

On Ash Wednesday, we remember first that we are mortal. At our core we are dirt, clay, the stuff of the ground. God created us from dirt and to it we will return. We are of the earth, as are all the other life forms upon this tenderly balanced little planet. And just like all living things, our lifespan is finite. In the end we all cease to be. No matter what we acquire or accomplish in this life, there comes a point where the dirt we are will falter.

Tonight we also remember that we are flawed beings. Each and every one of us is born into a world of brokenness. And this broken world breaks us, too, bit by bit. The cracks we bear are called different things by different people: shortcomings, personality faults, bad habits...our religious term is *sin*. When we recognize our sins, we recognize our imperfections. And that can help us to strive to do better rather than just wearing away in our previously well established ruts of missing the mark. When we realize our sins, we are given the gift of another chance to turn to God and set things right.

The Stooges are partly right—we are dirt indeed. But not just dirt. Not just clay. And we are far from being just these simple and base things. We are also ensouled beings. Our sacred story tells us that the clay or dirt which God gathered into our human form sprang into life only after holy breath passed into it. We are the joining together of earth and heaven, and our nature yearns for heaven just as readily as it does toward the earthly. So we are not just dirt, but dirt that is somehow holy.

God demonstrated this by coming to dwell among us in Jesus. Human flesh may be made from the clay and dirt of the earth, but it is also a fit vessel for God’s full presence. Now Jesus had a leg up on us, there is no doubt. He more fully embodied God than most of us could dream about

¹ With thanks to Rev. Sarah Buteux and Rev. Rev. Bonnie Baird for the template on which this homily was built, including the title.

² *Dirt*, from *Funhouse*, The Stooges, ©1970.

doing. But Jesus also said “the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these...”³ And that means, that we, too, are gathered into Christ’s work, and we are Christ’s ambassadors in the world, fit to carry on his ministry of healing and reconciliation.

So, tonight we fix our earthling eyes on the heavens and endeavor to continue Christ’s work. We strive to build treasures in heaven even as we journey on earth. We tune our hearts to God’s frequency and again turn away from our failings. We acknowledge our dirt and also strive to be holy as Jesus was, and as we are destined to be. The ashes placed on our forehead symbolize our mortality and lack of perfection, but they are also a symbol of God’s great love for us, for they are made in the shape of the cross; God’s ultimate proof that though we may be made from dirt, we are not ever treated like dirt by God. We are instead dirt about which God cares deeply... deeply enough to breathe life into...deeply enough to experience being among us first hand... deeply enough to offer multiple chances...deeply enough to ultimately make holy.

Now friends, let us begin to ready ourselves for our journey through Lent by joining in our Unison Prayer of Confession.

³ John 14:12a-e.