

Homily Notes

Dirt unites us

I want to begin by expressing my humble gratitude for the invitation to address you in this place, on this occasion. At this time of great division in our country and our world, this group / this assembly is a shining beacon of life. Might I be so bold as to suggest that this gathering would make our Heavenly Father happy, even joyful. For we are, in this gathering, celebrating unity assembled in his name. It's what his Son asked us to do.

Today, we offer our bodies, our foreheads in particular, as a blank canvas on which to paint the truth of our identity. Temporary as it might be, it speaks to who we are, and to whom we belong. A beautiful and unique portrayal of the cross, a sign of the greatest love, is created using soiled ashes and dirt, material we might walk upon or discard as having no useful value.

The words, "remember that you are dust" direct us back to the very beginning of mankind, when God formed Adam, literally 'the earthy one,' from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. Far from suggesting that we are sinful rubbish, these words remind us, that we are creatures who depend on God for our very existence. However much we might, at times, protest against the idea, we are creatures who are dependent on the God who made us.

We exist, in all of our brokenness, made in the image of Him. Fragile creatures, we offer prayers of joy, gratitude and praise, for the gift of life that he gives to us, full well knowing that that nothing in our lives is certain, everything is only temporary, and that our next breath could well be our very last.

Today marks the beginning of our Lenten season, a time when we stop to assess how we're doing in our journey through life. The Prophet Joel wrote concerned about the need to address the spiritual brokenness of his collected community. The gospel writer, Matthew focused on the interiority of his followers.

Accompanying this dirt and ashes, is the call to 'Repent.' Like the Jewish people in the time of Joel, our world so desperately needs healing. Like the followers of Matthew, our own personal lives are far from perfect. We reflect during this season on the spiritual areas in which we can grow and the sinful habits of our lives that we need to avoid. We repent choosing to reorient our lives, both personally and collectively, away from our selfishness and towards our God and our neighbor.

Reorienting, changing the habits and preferences of our lives is never easy. The dirt on our foreheads reminds us that it is always a messy business. Change can be difficult and is often complicated, until it is complete. It has been said that, "change is hard at first, messy in the middle, and gorgeous at the end." It is almost always more challenging, and takes longer than we expect. And its important, no necessary, that never, ever give up.

During this Lent, something challenging and transformative can take place, if we are willing to embrace the dirt of who we are and accept the grace of God that promises to make us beautiful. As the words of the season are pronounced over us this day, as our foreheads are painted with ashes, we enter confrontation and conflict. We enter into a battle is for our identity and our soul. We accept the painful truth of who we are and commit to embrace a new way of life is offered that is different from everything we know.

And when the transition is complete, what awaits us on the other side of the conversion, is our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. In our belief that He is the way, the truth and the life is his promise of faith, hope and love. Through him, and with him we can experience heaven on earth, and eternal life in the kingdom. Hence, the symbol of the Cross, the sign of the greatest love, the sacrifice of the Son that culminates not in his death of Good Friday, but with his resurrection on Easter Sunday.

So today, everyone gets to receive the dirt on our foreheads. Everyone qualifies, nobody is required to earn it. We gather as sons and daughters of he who created us, broken in our humanity, united in our mortality and sinfulness, in need of forgiveness and redemption. We thank God, today and everyday, for the gift of his Son who came to redeem us. That's the good news of the Gospel that we embrace with this marvelous dirt, these redeeming ashes.

Readings***A Reading from Book of Joel 2:1-2, 12-17***

Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
 for the day of the LORD is coming, it is near--
a day of darkness and gloom,
 a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness spread upon the mountains
 a great and powerful army comes;
their like has never been from of old,
 nor will be again after them
 in ages to come.

Yet even now, says the LORD,
 return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
 rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the LORD, your God,
 for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
 and relents from punishing.
Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
 and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain offering and a drink offering
 for the LORD, your God?

Blow the trumpet in Zion;
 sanctify a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
 gather the people.
Sanctify the congregation;
 assemble the aged;
gather the children,
 even infants at the breast.
Let the bridegroom leave his room,
 and the bride her canopy.

Between the vestibule and the altar
 let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep.
Let them say, "Spare your people, O LORD,

and do not make your heritage a mockery,
 a byword among the nations.
 Why should it be said among the peoples,
 'Where is their God?'"

Psalm 103

Bless the Lord, O my soul, *
 and all that is within me, bless his holy Name.
 Bless the Lord, O my soul, *
 and forget not all his benefits.
 He forgives all your sins *
 and heals all your infirmities;
 He redeems your life from the grave *
 and crowns you with mercy and loving-kindness;
 He satisfies you with good things, *
 and your youth is renewed like an eagle's.
 The Lord executes righteousness *
 and judgment for all who are oppressed.
 He made his ways known to Moses *
 and his works to the children of Israel.]
 The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, *
 slow to anger and of great kindness.
 He will not always accuse us, *
 nor will he keep his anger for ever.
 He has not dealt with us according to our sins, *
 nor rewarded us according to our wickedness.
 For as the heavens are high above the earth, *
 so is his mercy great upon those who fear him.
 As far as the east is from the west, *
 so far has he removed our sins from us.
 As a father cares for his children, *
 so does the Lord care for those who fear him.
 For he himself knows whereof we are made; *
 he remembers that we are but dust.
 Our days are like the grass; *
 we flourish like a flower of the field;
 When the wind goes over it, it is gone, *
 and its place shall know it no more.
 But the merciful goodness of the Lord endures for ever on those who fear him, *
 and his righteousness on children's children;
 On those who keep his covenant *
 and remember his commandments and do them.
 The Lord has set his throne in heaven, *

and his kingship has dominion over all.
Bless the Lord, you angels of his,
you mighty ones who do his bidding, *
and hearken to the voice of his word.
Bless the Lord, all you his hosts, *
you ministers of his who do his will.
Bless the Lord, all you works of his,
in all places of his dominion; *
bless the Lord, O my soul.]

A Reading from the 2nd Letter of Paul to the Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10

We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made himself to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says,

*"At an acceptable time I have listened to you,
and on a day of salvation I have helped you."*

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see-- we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

A Reading from the Gospel according to Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

"So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."