

Holding the Paradoxes of Ash Wednesday

Today we are commemorating two events that do not seem to belong to one another:

Ash Wednesday, when we recite the sobering words *remember you are dust and to dust you will return* and Valentine's Day, when we celebrate love in its myriad forms. Today, I am receiving ashes on my forehead in the shape of a cross and exchanging cards in bright red envelopes with my loved ones. I am reminded of my mortality and the transitory nature of my existence while celebrating love— that force of energy that infuses all of creation with life and holds us all together.

It seems paradoxical, doesn't it? The Apostle Paul names similar paradoxes in our epistle reading written to his community in Corinth. He acknowledges that the people around him perceive him to be an unknown impostor, someone who is poor without any material wealth, someone who is sorrowful, punished, and dying. And this is true. But it is also true that Paul is deeply known by God and has been divinely chosen and sent to them. It is also true that Paul's inner person is alive and rejoicing, and he is making many spiritually rich through his teachings about the risen Christ. And it is true that Paul has immeasurable abundance through his eternal life in God. For Paul, all of these polarities exist together— dying while coming more fully alive, lack and abundance, sorrow and joy, they are all part of being a mortal human who is full of that divine energy that infuses all of creation with life.

Paul is exemplifying what the philosopher Teilhard de Chardin meant when he said: *"We are spiritual beings having a human experience..."*, or as we here at St James might say on this paradoxical Ash Wednesday Valentine's Day: *We are dust celebrating the love that binds us all together.*

You may or may not know that the lawn just in front of our church building is a memorial lawn and is home to [many] deceased people's ashes who have been buried there— generations of parishioners and their loved ones who have been

returned to the earth and remain a part of the life of our community. Earlier this week I had the privilege of doing my first committal at St James, which is a short service in the Book of Common Prayer to bury people's ashes. It was for Cathy Canada, one of our beloved parishioners who died this last year. I gathered with a couple of her family members and one of her close friends on the lawn around a hole our sexton Clay dug earlier in the day. After reading the opening prayers, I got down on my knees and carefully, slowly, began to pour her ashes into the ground. At the same time, I recited the liturgy: *"In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ we commend to Almighty God our sister Cathy and we commit her body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust"*. I then added ashes from a small vial her family members brought of Cathy's sister, so that they could rest in eternal peace together. Then we took turns covering the ashes with dirt to seal the hole, and pressed the grass back on top of it, making it barely perceptible that this corner of the lawn had ever been disrupted.

*Earth to earth
Ashes to ashes
Remember you are dust
And to dust you will return*

Cathy was buried just days before Ash Wednesday, which leads us into our 40 days of Lent, culminating in Holy Week, which ends on Easter Sunday, when kids will run on the lawn over Cathy's ashes as they collect Easter eggs, laughing and playing, delighting in childhood, as the life of our community continues on, and earth and ashes and dust intermingle as one, because like Cathy, when the dust of our bones return to the earth, we will become part of this interconnected and cyclical nature of existence. The dust of our bodies will intermingle with the soil, soil that supports the grass, grass that gathers dew, dew that evaporates into clouds, clouds whose precipitation waters the earth, earth that children will play on. And in this we are never separate from creation, or from one

another or from God. Even in death we are a part of life, even in life we are participating in death.

It seems paradoxical, doesn't it? Ash Wednesday helps us hold all of these paradoxes together. In a few moments we will take ashes made from burnt palm branches from last year's Palm Sunday service and trace them across your forehead in the sign of a cross as we say: *Remember you are dust and to dust you will return.*

This ritual is a reminder that we are deeply, irrevocably interconnected to all of creation and to one another, and we are part of the cyclical nature of existence that is continuously playing out and overlapping— all of creation is continuously in stages of birth and life, dying and death, and regeneration, and Christ is the life force that infuses every part of this cycle with love, so that like the Apostle Paul, even as we are physically dying and suffering, we can also be coming more fully spiritually alive.

Every single part of our lives as spiritual beings having a human experience exists in God and is infused with Christ— our sorrow and rejoicing, our lack and abundance, our physical deaths and spiritual resurrections, the ash of the palm branches and the ash of our bones, and today we get to embody this paradox more fully on this paradoxical Ash Wednesday Valentine's Day through remembering: *We are dust, celebrating the love that binds us all together.*