

Connecting with God: Dust and Ashes

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This Christmas I told my husband that one of my presents to him was NOT asking for a fire in our fireplace. I love fires in fireplaces but my husband says the smoke aggravates his allergies and the ashes are a royal pain to clean up. They float around while you're trying to sweep them up and make black smears on your hands and clothes. Dust, dirt and ashes all fall in the categories of nuisances we'd be glad to do without. But when we look more deeply, they are full of meaning and connection with the God who created us.

In the ancient Biblical story of creation, God forms human beings from the dust of the earth; the name Adam comes from the word for earth and Eve from the word for living. Living earth—that's what we are. Did you know that scientists say we are made of stardust; "the iron in our blood, the calcium in our bones, the chlorine in our skin come from ancient stars whose explosions scattered the elements across the galaxy. From the ashes grew new stars and around one of them a system of planets and asteroids and moons. A cluster of dust coalesced to form the earth, and life emerged from those ancient deaths." RHE 43. We are made of dust and ashes, and that's what we return to when we die. So all through the Bible those are symbols of our human condition, our frailty, our creatureliness. In spite of our big brains and capacity for imagination, creativity, spirituality --we are still creatures. We are not God.

And we can either make our peace with that or we can fight it. In the creation story, Adam and Eve fight it. They want to be like God so they lie, hide, blame each other and end up leaving the garden of innocence and simplicity for a world of conflict. Their descendants continue the violent quest to have power like God and continue to experience the fallout. And ashes become a sign in the Jewish faith of mortality and repentance. In the Christian faith, we gather on Ash Wednesday to confess our sins, put ash on our foreheads and remember the truth: that we are caught up in sin, that we are dust and to dust we will return.

The problem is that our human pride makes us reject that truth. We don't want to feel vulnerable like that, we want to feel superior to someone else. That's what happens in our scripture reading. A woman has been caught in adultery and dragged before Jesus. Judgment is fairly crackling in the air --first against the woman who's publicly shamed (and notice that the man involved is somehow absent from this scene) but secondly, against Jesus, because the scribes and Pharisees hope to condemn Jesus if he fails to uphold the law with its punishment. They want to expose Jesus as a slacker in comparison to their own zeal.

But Jesus refuses to play the power game with them. He doesn't argue; he's silent. He doesn't go face to face, head to head with his opponents; he crouches down to the ground and writes in the dirt. Don't you imagine that must have confused everyone? And then he makes a simple statement: Let any of you who is without sin cast the first stone. Brilliant

People love to speculate what he was writing: maybe the sins of the people in the crowd? I think it's pretty significant that he was writing in dirt, that symbol of human limitation, sin and mortality. His message got through and one by one the people in the crowd dropped their stones and went away. He says to the woman, "has anyone here condemned you?" No, sir. "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way and sin no more."

People also love to point out that Jesus said, "sin no more." In a way, that's fair: he's not condoning adultery. But the point is that God does not want condemnation but healing. And God wants that for everyone, not just for the woman but for all those who were so eager to throw stones, so desperate to show their superiority.

Rachel Held Evans writes, "we all move through the world in the same state—broken and beloved—and we are all in need of healing and grace...So why do our churches sometimes feel more like country clubs than AA meetings?" Why are we so busy trying to look like perfect church people? She says, "I suspect it's the same impulse that told me I should drop a few pounds before joining the Y so as not to embarrass myself in front of the fit people. Or why my mother cleans the bathroom before the cleaning lady gets there." We don't want to show our dirt, to air our dirty laundry as the saying goes.

Years ago, our teenage daughter got in trouble for something and had to attend one of those Straight Talk intervention programs with a parent, although the kids and parents were in different groups. John went with her and somehow in the introductions it came out that he was a pastor. He wanted to sink under the table. What was worse, the instructor then used him as an example, "Don't feel ashamed, even a pastor can have a child that gets in trouble." Now that our daughter is grown, he and I have both told that story from the pulpit because we don't want to perpetuate the myth that pastors and their families never have problems. We all struggle; that's the human condition.

Holding onto a myth of perfection will make you sick. And it will alienate you from those around you who need to hear the truth that we all struggle. Church should be the last place where we have to wear a mask in front of others or in front of God. Psalm 103 says, "as a father has compassion for his children, so God has compassion for us/ For he knows how we are made, he remembers that we are dust."

Being dust may not be something that you ever aspired to, but there's a peace in acknowledging who we are. We discover humility, another word that comes from dirt, humus. That humility allows us to hear the rest of the story: in the words of the prophet Isaiah, a messenger from God will come to proclaim good news to the brokenhearted "to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair." Through this messenger, Jesus Christ, God shows us "how to heal instead of kill, how to love instead of hate, how to live instead of long for more." Our quest to become like God

fails, but instead God becomes like us to show us how to live well. The dust and ashes of humility are the seedbed for new growth.

That's how it is in nature, right? Dirt, decay, decomposition fertilize the ground. Fire clears the underbrush so that light can reach the soil. In the middle of a log turning to ash are the glowing embers that give us warmth. So it is for us: accepting our human condition opens us to new gifts.

One of those gifts is a deeper connection to God's other creatures, who are precious in themselves not just for the ways we can use them. I'm a sucker for animal videos; to watch dogs playing in the snow, eagles catching an updraft, baby goats bouncing around the farmyard like they have springs on their hooves-- who are we to think we're the only creatures who know joy? To see geese flying in formation and finding their way home across thousands of miles, or dolphins communicating by sonar—they know mysteries we can't fathom. For human beings to be God's creatures in such good company is a source of peace.

Mary Oliver has a book of poetry that caught my attention because it's called *The God of Dirt*, after a line in one of the poems. She writes,

“The god of dirt came to me many times
and said so many wise and delectable things, I lay in the grass listening
to his dog voice, crow voice, frog voice”

She goes on, finding a rabbit in the field, waiting hopefully for it to leap into the air, but sadly realizing that it's dead.

“And the day after I've shoveled the earth over, in a field nearby
I find a small bird's nest, lined pale and silvery,
And the chicks—are you listening, death?—warm in the rabbit's fur.”

A part of us longs to escape the world of dust and ashes, of sin and death, and instead be like God in power and knowledge. But instead, in Jesus Christ, God comes to us, guides us to love and peace, not only in our eternal life in God, but in this life right here, right now. Let us pray.

Quotations from Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, Thomas Harris Publ., 2015, and Mary Oliver, quoted in *Mary Oliver and The God of Dirt*, by Thomas Mann, Cowley Publications, 2004