

Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday Penance Service 2018

February 14, 2018

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Ash Wednesday on Valentine's Day. That is a unique juxtaposition. But then again, its suggestive. After all, too often it is those we love the most that we can at times treat the worst. If our beloved is our other self, then to treat ourselves badly is bad news for them too.

When the priest smudges our forehead with Ash he recites: "remember that you are ash and unto ash you shall return." Our lives can be messy, we can crumble under pressure. Its been that way from the beginning. Genesis tells us that n the Garden of Eden God shaped the first human from the mud around him like a potter. Then he blew his divine breath into the mud and Adam came alive.

Our souls have been divided from the beginning, part earthen flesh, part divine spirit. Early Christians imagined our soul as a battleground between the sacred and the demonic, sin and grace. Our task is to discern our desires, to discriminate those that are inspirations from those that are temptations. And to act accordingly.

But that takes practice, and training to develop a soul sensitive enough to know what is right yet tough enough to resist what is wrong.

Adam is actually a Hebrew word that means earthen and human. Adam is the adam made from the adam. We wish that our lives were not so messy, so dirty, so apt to crumble under pressure. Perhaps that is why we prize diamonds so much. Diamonds are clear, transparent, and unbreakable. Would it not have been better had God created us out of diamond?

But diamonds very purity makes them sterile. Their very unreachability means that no life can take root. Their impenetrability, that any water can only run off its surface. A clod of dirt on the other hand, is porous, the rain can seep in. A seed can penetrate, germinate and take root. Mess and dirt is the price of being fruitful. Love means vulnerability. Christ came to redeem evil's victims, but also evil's perpetrators. For justice is twinned with mercy. Righteousness with forgiveness.

Our calling is not to be perfect. For that is beyond the human born of the earth. Our calling is rather never to lose faith in that divine breath that also animates us, that blows through our messy wet clay, that blows over our crumbling clod of dirt. For it is in our faith that rests our hope. And from our faith and our hope that our love can take root, and from a seed grow into a great tree under which all the birds of the air may take shelter and find shade.