

Remember, You are Dust

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The Ash Wednesday gesture of ashes on one's forehead is an odd act. On the one hand, it is so elemental and primitive, a priestly act of rubbing charcoal on our faces.¹ On the other hand, the act of ashes is indeed a freighted, sacramental gesture that in one quick moment parades the whole of our life before our eyes. There are no doubt good reasons (perhaps inchoate, but not therefore less good) that the rite is steadily gaining credence in "non-liturgical churches."

I

When the priest imposes ashes, the Bible is quoted: "Remember, you are dust" (Gen. 3:19). In quoting this passage, the church calls to mind the entire narrative of the garden, and specifically, God's decree concerning the serpent (Gen. 3:14-15), the woman (v. 16), and the man (vv. 17-19). Our verse is the culmination and climax of that awesome decree of judgment. Thus we begin our reflection with an *exegetical observation*.

Any text derived from Gen. 2-3 poses tricky interpretive questions, because the church's hearing of the text has been impaired by the overload of scholastic theology that is so present among us. Upon hearing such a text, our first instinct is to take the priestly formula as one more denunciation of sin, as though Ash Wednesday were a celebration of our sin and unworthiness. There are three reasons for hearing the formula as a statement of degradation.

First, the whole of Lent has been popularly defined as a season of guilt and penance, a period for confronting and acknowledging (and even wallowing in) our sinfulness. The sacramental history of the church (especially outside the Reformed tradition) has linked the journey of Jesus to the cross by stress on self-sacrifice, self-denial, self-abasement, and self-rejection. The "dust formula" easily serves such an agenda.

Second, the story of Genesis 2-3 is popularly and uncritically heard as an account of "original sin" and "The Fall." Classical theological exposition serves the propensity of popular piety just noted. In the face of such popular piety, it is exceedingly difficult to liberate the narrative of Genesis 2-3 from the imposed themes of "original sin" and "The Fall," even though few critical interpreters read the text in such a way.

Third, and more closely, our formula occurs at the end of God's speech of judgment (vv. 14-19), so that the text is heard as "remember, you are under curse."

Against the weight of popular piety informed by scholastic theology and uncritical sacramentalism, I shall argue that our "dust formula" is not a statement about curse, judgment, or indictment, so that the imposition of ashes is

not related to guilt and sin. That is, the act of ashes is not primarily an act of penance.

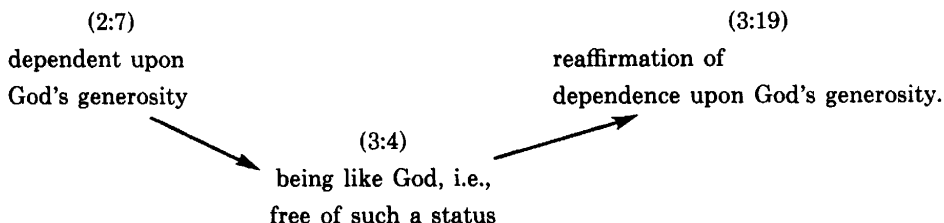
It is plausible to suggest that our formula was an independent wisdom saying, a short, popular saying that urged reflection upon human mortality. When it is placed into this narrative, at the end of the decree of God, it forms a narrative *inclusio* with Gen. 2:7, and no doubt refers back to that “formula of origin.” Thus at the beginning (2:7) and at the end of this narrative (3:19), there are parallel, intentionally placed statements. The first narrates the way in which human persons have received life from the power of God:

The Lord God forms (*yšr*) the human person of the dust (*‘apher*) of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living creature (Gen. 2:7).

This is a crucial and well-known text for understanding and articulating a biblical notion of human personhood. This formula affirms four matters: first, the human person is fundamentally and elementally material in origin and composition, genuinely an “earth-creature,” subject to all the realities and limitations of materiality. Second, because the human person is an “earth-creature,” it belongs with, to, and for the earth, and all other creatures share the same qualities of life. Third, this mass of earth (“dust”) is no self-starter. In and of itself, it remains inanimate and lifeless. “Dust from the ground” by itself is no human person. Fourth, the vitality of the human person depends on God’s gift of breath which is freely and graciously given without cause, but which never becomes the property or possession of the human person.

Thus human persons are dependent, vulnerable, and precarious, relying in each moment on the gracious gift of breath which makes human life possible. Moreover, this precarious condition is definitional for human existence, marking the human person from the very first moment of existence. That is, human vulnerability is not late, not chosen, not punishment, not an aberration, not related to sin. It belongs to the healthy, original characterization of human personhood in relation to God. This is what it means to be human. This rather elemental and straightforward physiology marks the human person as a creature who lives by the daily, moment by moment generosity of God.

The narrative of Gen. 2-3 concerns the risk of trying to escape or transcend the modest status of creatureliness, the dangerous venture of “being like God” (3:4). When we arrive at the end of the narrative, it is as though the conclusion of 3:19 tersely footnotes 2:7, as though the narrative says: “See 2:7 above for a true characterization of human reality.” Thus the movement of the human drama in this narrative is in three steps:



Nothing about this precarious status is changed through the narrative. At the end of the narrative, the human person is as at the beginning. In the narrative, the human person seeks for and yearns for another status; at the end of the narrative, however, an alternative status is found to be impossible. The human person cannot escape the role of creatureliness given at the beginning of the narrative. Thus in the Ash Wednesday formula, the summons is not to acknowledge sin, guilt, and penance, but it is a call to *definitional creatureliness*, which in the middle of our life, as in the middle of the narrative, we tend to forget and seek to override.

II

The “dust formula” provides material for *fresh theological reflection*. The Ash Wednesday gesture is an invitation to rethink our true identity as a creature of God, kept alive by God’s good gift of breath (cf. Ps. 104:29-30). I suggest two theological facets to this narrative which are closely tied to each other.

First, the formula invites a theological reconsideration of human personhood (that is, theological anthropology). In our busy, anxious, and loud society, this reconsideration is a precious moment that needs to be guarded and nourished. We are invited by this formula to reaffirm our fundamental creatureliness, a creature of God wrought in and through God’s fidelity. The Genesis story suggests that human creatureliness, *vis-a-vis*, God involves, (a) work to do *under a command*: Human creatureliness means to accept the work of caring for the garden, to till it and keep it. (b) *An uncompromising prohibition*, to refrain from the tree of good and evil, that is, to resist the kind of ambition which seeks to make us like God. Human creatureliness means to honor boundaries and limits which are not the limits of ignorance, but the limits of obedience and awe. (c) A *massive, genuine permit* to share the whole goodness of creation: “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden.” True creatureliness means to be situated in the fabric of the life-support system of creation which makes our life not only possible, but good, whole, and abundant.

To recall our creatureliness is to affirm *the command* of responsibility, *the prohibition* at the boundaries, and the *permit* of generosity which envelops all of our life. All of this goes with being God’s breathed on dust.

The second theme for our Lenten reflection is theology proper;² Ash Wednesday is a day for pondering God. Specifically, I suggest the theological text most closely linked to our “dust formula” is Psalm 103. We need to consider the whole Psalm, but the connecting part is v. 14:

God knows our frame,
God remembers that we are dust.

The term for “dust” is the same as in Gen. 2:7 and 3:19. More telling, the term we render “frame” is *yašar*, our having been “formed.” The noun is the same root as the verb “form” in Gen. 2:7. Thus God remembers the way we have been formed in the beginning. Perhaps God, in this Psalm, remembers the narrative of Gen. 2-3, recalling the entire tale of our odd and awesome point of

origin in the powerful generosity of God. Moreover, the verb “remember” is telling. A parallel to “remember” Ps. 103:14 is not found in the Genesis narrative, but in our Ash Wednesday formula. The word “remember” has introduced it into the liturgical formula derived from Gen. 3:19, though the term is not in the text itself. We are invited in the gesture of ashes to remember. What we remember in Ash Wednesday is what God remembers in Ps. 103. We remember that we are dust, and God remembers that we are dust. In this Psalm, God recalls the narrative of origin, recalling how we were formed of dust, and now we are invited to recall this same narrative of origin.

This remembering on God’s part evokes in God an act of gracious fidelity. The reality of our “dust” does not evoke in God rejection or judgment, but fidelity. In Ps. 103, v. 14 stands as a pivot point between two crucial affirmations about God. Just preceding this verse (vv. 11-13) human transgressions are noted by God and removed; they are made distant, removed as an immediate danger and threat. No big accent is placed on human sin. Human sin is acknowledged and then ignored. What counts is God’s gracious act of removal. Concerning this removal, the poem utilizes two of the great words of the covenant tradition:

So great is God’s steadfast love (hesed) . . .

As a father pities (raḥam) children, so the Lord pities (raḥam). When God remembers our dusty creatureliness, it evokes in God fidelity and compassion. God’s loyal covenant love is the counterpoint to our dust.

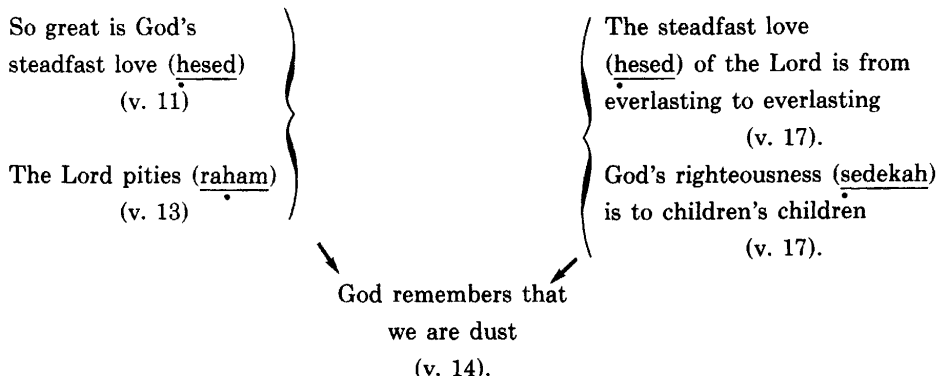
Just following our pivotal verse 14, human finitude and mortality are recognized by God (vv. 15-18). God knows we are going to die, and this awareness evokes in God deep, caring concern:

The steadfast love (hesed) of the Lord is from
everlasting to everlasting . . .

God’s righteousness (ṣedeqah) to children’s children.

God’s recognition of our transitoriness evokes God’s love and God’s righteousness, God’s resolve to right the world for us in ways that we cannot do for ourselves.

Thus Psalm 103 surrounds our “dust” with all of God’s massive faithful power. The rhetorical map of our human dust is shaped in this way in this Psalm:



It is as though God fully recognizes our needfulness and responds with the giving of God's own self in faithfulness, compassion, and righteousness. Indeed, what is detailed in the Psalm is what God already has done in Gen. 2:7, in the primal "forming," which makes new life possible from dust. The Psalm asserts that God endlessly continues the same work, "from everlasting to everlasting," "to children's children" (v. 17).

Thus when we "remember that we are dust," we are made freshly aware that along with our remembering, God is remembering, and regarding, for this is a God who "forgives, heals, redeems, crowns, satisfies, and vindicates" (vv. 3-6). The memory of dust then does not diminish and denigrate and humiliate, but is rather an evangelical affirmation that as we own our true self, we are invited to a trusting embrace of the faithfulness and power of God mobilized for our well-being. As we face our true selves, we discern our true place before the God of mercy and righteousness who continues to give life as God has given life in our narrative of origin. Our life in this moment of dust is rearticulated and redescribed in the truth of the gospel.

III

These exegetical and theological observations take on poignancy when brought into contact with *our contemporary sociocultural context*. The familiar priestly formula may indeed evoke different intentions in different contexts, and the church in different times has found many varied meanings in the formula. But for now, we are concerned with our particular cultural context. The priest says, "Remember, you are dust." What does it mean to be greeted at the front of the church with the imperative, "remember!"?

I suggest that in our sociocultural context, the priestly imperative "remember" intends to counteract our massive forgetting. Our forgetting is not just inattentiveness or a failure to recall. It is not just a careless aberration. Rather it is a large, shared propensity to amnesia that besets us all and is the inevitable outcome of the dominant values of our culture. The amnesia which besets us commonly is sanctioned by our Enlightenment mentality which on the one hand has scuttled tradition, and on the other hand, has reduced treasured memory to flat facticity. The sanctions of the Enlightenment have been reinforced by the seductions of consumerism which leave us so satiated (or lusting to be satiated) in the present tense, so preoccupied with present well-being, that our present intensities serve as a narcotic against a defining past or a summoning future. What is forgotten among us are the very categories of identity and perception whereby we receive a possible humanness.

So think of the procession coming to the front of the church. It is in large part a parade of the numbed who tend to forget what is crucial to our humanness. The act of ashes is a poignant gesture of reappropriating what we have lost, a jarring of the sanctions of our recent history and the seductions of our current economics. I suggest that we commonly struggle with two crucial forgettings, clearly related to each other.

On the one hand, we are to remember *our forgotten creatureliness*. (In this assertion, notice how far we are away from accent on sin, guilt, and

repentance). We have forgotten our story of origin and our source of humanness. We have forgotten "our frame," our being formed. In the most drastic recognition, we have forgotten our morality, the reality that we are going to die soon; of course, our technological gains reenforce our avoidance of the topic and truth of our life. We imagine that if we are smart enough and quick enough and strong enough, we can fend off such a destiny by our self-securing.

The loss of our creatureliness causes us to imagine that we are more powerful and more capable than we finally are. It is this forgetting, I submit, that lies behind the greed, selfishness, anxiety, and brutality that drives our common life. We imagine that we are free to take whatever we want and can get. We imagine that we are required to take whatever we can get, because there is no one to give us what we need. We imagine that fending off death, which we can do for ourselves and which we must do for ourselves, gives us rights of usurpation and privileges of confiscation from our brothers and sisters, and from the creation all around us. In our amnesia, the very threat of death that we think we have overcome in fact haunts us and drives us in debilitating ways. In what we take to be our massive and effective resistance to death, we in fact succumb. We become creatures in the grasp of the power of death. Because of our amnesia, however, we do not notice our succumbing. We imagine that we have won, and thereby we distort and completely misperceive our life.

In our forgetting, we neglect not only our God-given fragility. We also lose track of our vocation. We are, as breathed on dust, called into the service and company of another, called to do a work other than our own. This creature, formed of dust, is entrusted with the garden, with all the animals, and with all living things. Our creatureliness binds us to the role of steward, friend, and companion of all other creatures who share our fragility. We are to guard their well-being and dignity. Forgetting our creatureliness entails forgetting our true place and rightful role in the world. Instead of caring for and guarding, we assume license to use, exploit, and oppress. We forget what is important about us and our creatureliness.

On the other hand, we *also forget what God remembers*. We are invited to remember not only what we must remember, but to remember what God unfailingly remembers. We are authorized in recalling our creatureliness, that we are a daily creature of this creator who is endlessly forming and continually breathing on, naming and summoning, guarding and feeding. That is, we remember again that our life, like v. 14 in Psalm 103, is surrounded behind and before by the *hesed* of Yahweh who wills for us more good than we can will for ourselves. In this poignant gesture of remembering, we reaffirm

That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ . . . that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit for his purpose for my salvation . . . ³

The ashes are not a sign of abasement or degradation. They are rather a sign; we are marked with an alternative identity, consisting in the asymmetrical affirmation of fragile creator and faithful creature. Those ashes of remembering are a mark of Cain (cf. Gen. 4:15), kept safe in a hostile world, a mark written

on our hand in affirming whose we are and who we are (cf. Is. 44:5).

When we go back to the pew after this freighted moment, we are transformed. We have broken free of the sanctions of the Enlightenment and the seductions of consumerism. The moment is rather like a homecoming, when we "come down where we ought to be." Our foundational homelessness is overcome.⁴ We are welcomed home, no less fragile, but embracing our fragility which is now surrounded by a large, holy fidelity. In this moment of palpable creatureliness, fragility is not a warrant for greedy self-serving. It is rather an invitation to trust in the governor of the garden, who frees us for our work in being for our fellow creatures.

IV

Our exegetical, theological, and sociological criticism all come finally to this powerful *moment of liturgical confrontation*. In good liturgy, the inchoate force of the act is always more powerful than our capacity to explain what we say and do.⁵ What makes a sacrament into sacrament is that the act is not subject to our rational explanation of what happens. The act is characteristically fraught with surplus. This act of ashes is just such an act overflowing with surplus.

It is a simple act. In its priestly character, it has an impersonal dimension. The priest does not hug us or call us by name, but speaks with distanced severity. The act is not designed to make us feel better, but it is an act of magisterial redefinition. In this moment the priest rises to solemn authority, the authority to recharacterize and redefine our life. We are in the presence of the congregation, and in this moment, we are along with the priest, expected to do our own remembering as we have done our own forgetting. We do not remember for anyone else, but for ourselves alone. The act is so simple and direct. I am addressed in an imperative, an imperative which is singular in its address and force. I am given a formula that is at least 3000 years old, but we keep reiterating that formula. I am touched by a hand, a brushed marking, a sign linking me to morality and obedience, marked in ashes, marked by what is left of our "earthly remains" when we will have been discarded.

All of these rather ordinary gestures, however, combine and conspire with a piercing force to make this moment laden and dangerous. It is a moment of confrontation, of combat and assault, in which a battle is waged for my identity. Liturgy is the proximate source of alternative existence, and this is an ordinary act that begins for me something new, namely a creatureliness which I have either neglected or resisted.

- A world of memory meets the world of consumerism.
- A world of creatureliness counters the world of autonomy.
- A world of fidelity impinges upon the world of homelessness.

In this priestly formula, I am driven back to origins, to embrace large intentions for me that override my small self-presentation. I am situated for a stunning moment in the large panorama of creation. My name and my duty and my well-being are confirmed. I need not any longer practice my resigned

amnesia, because I am grasped by an identity which has long been written in this narrative of forming.

Then I must leave the moment of sacrament and the service and the holy place—to return to the “real world.” Except I discover that this is *the real world*, the moment of truth, my truth, God’s truth spoken over me. And I begin to notice that my “un-dusted” experience has a phony ring to it.

What has happened is not simply a smudge on my forehead. It is rather an awesome, visible sigh of freedom and dignity, fragility and home. While it is there—and it lingers there a long time, because I continue to feel the priestly finger carving the gospel on my skin—while it is there, I have this sensation of freedom and energy and courage, strength in weakness, exaltation in lowliness. I am destined for a life other than my own, which in the end is my own true life. That may be what is meant in our formula about dying and being raised to new life (cf. Rom. 6:1-11). These are the *ashes of relinquishment*, of dying whereby my whole false identity is released. These are, at the same time, the *ashes of receptivity*, flooded with new life given on Friday by the Friday one,

who forgives all your iniquities,
who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
who satisfies you with good as long as you live . . . (Ps. 103:3-5).

This new life is now surrounded in and saturated by blessing, a life now capable of hosting a blessing and being a blessing.⁶

NOTES

¹ I will use the words “priestly, priest” rather than “ministerial, minister” because I wish to underscore the sacramental character of the act of imposition of ashes. In this act Reformed ministers are engaging in their proper priestly act which mediates new life through the generative power of the liturgy.

² The connection of the two themes, reconsideration of human personhood and pondering God, makes an argument arranged in the same way John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Book I, chapter 1, ed. John T. McNeill, *Library of Christian Classics*, 20 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 35-37, begins his theological exposition:

Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists in two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern . . . Accordingly, the knowledge of ourselves not only arouses us to seek God, but also, as it were, leads us by the hand to find him.

³ *The Heidelberg Catechism* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1962), 9.

⁴ On the theme of homelessness, see Peter Berger et al., *The Homeless Mind; Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), and most recently, Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1988), 216, 228, 268, who builds upon the primal work of Martin Buber.

⁵ It is exceedingly difficult, in my judgment, for those of us in the Reformed Tradition, to permit and acknowledge the surplus power of symbolic action that runs beyond and outside the categories of our theological containment. Nonetheless, such inchoate force is operative in such moments of priestly activity.

⁶ I am grateful to my colleague, A. Hale Schroer, for supplying me the materials which stimulated my thinking on the theme of this paper.