

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Bonded Dust

Today is when the church is called to remember its mortality. You come with your life to receive the ash from a deceased palm branch to be told by people like me to remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Some of my colleagues around the country have told their congregations they will not observe Lent this year. Their argument is that we have lived a yearlong 40 days of fasting. We've given up so much that we have seen our collective mortality reveal its fragile state. It's understandable.

Yet mortality is more than just death, doom, and gloom. Mortality is a journey. As soon as we are born, we are dying. We are given this life from God but subject to the whims of this world. The circumstances that surround our birth. The support system we have. The zip code we find ourselves in. It all shapes us. It's easy to forget as we go through this life that we are dust. Because dust doesn't feel human. It's malleable, yet

indestructible. We, on the other hand, feel solid, but we are clearly broken.

I think in our modern world so many of these Christian customs seem hokey, but their aim is quite practical. To remind us of who we are. To remind us of why the dust is essential and what it says about us. I think that's what Paul is doing in this passage this evening. He's trying to get a group of faithful people who have forgotten where they come from to remember what they are, who they are, and whom they come from. Which are good questions for us tonight. Because when you are forced to quarantine for roughly a year, it is easy to forget that. Ash Wednesday ritual that reminds us of that truth. Our faith can easily become dry, and when dust is dry it cannot bond.

In 1 Corinthians Paul declares that we are like a body with different gifts. Clearly though in this second letter that Paul writes this same body is being ripped apart. A corrosive virus has corrupted the connection of these people, so much so that Paul feels the need to make mention that the grace of God must not be accepted in vain. He declares our call is to put no obstacle between us and God. Our call is to

remember we are malleable dust and because of that it is only through the grace of Jesus Christ that the body becomes solid, and together we become beloved. That we are more than aimless, indestructible dust, we are the dust that is shaped by the anointing oil of God. That cross on your forehead declares that we have a purpose. A reason to remember. A reason to return. A reason to remain bonded. A reason to celebrate Lent because it reminds and reorients us to what we as a church are supposed to be doing.

Mount Vernon, tonight I want to share with you how you are living as bonded dust. How it is solidifying, and how we are continuing to remember right now. This is a letter I received just a few nights ago. It's about you.

Dear MVPC Covid Fund Task Force,

I am honored and humbled to receive your latest contribution of \$2500 to your Atlanta-area friends and neighbors in new worshiping communities. Truly, this season has stretched and challenged us all, taking much but also bringing us closer in unexpected ways.

In fact, you are now closer to a family who opened their doors to other family members whose jobs disappeared early in the pandemic. A 1600 square foot home with three bedrooms now houses 11 people all from one extended family in order to avoid experiencing homelessness. A contribution from you all in September paid their growing utility bill, Kroger gift cards helped them stretch their funds and sanity, with 11 people able to live off of two modest incomes. Because of you, 1 family was able to welcome 2 other families into their home.

You are also closer to 3 refugee families, forcibly removed from their homes and relocated to Clarkston, GA. With child care costing more than minimum wage earnings can cover, one parent works while the other remains home with their two children. Their sole source of income is a minimum wage job at the Tyson chicken factories, site of many virus outbreaks in essential workers. After 3 months of eating nothing more than rice for each meal, your donations covered the cost of bags of rice, and your Kroger gift cards provided them food, medicine, a thermometer, toilet paper, and peace of mind. Your contribution toward getting internet installed in one of the apartments allowed a school age

child to stay in school, not falling behind. Another family was able to afford pre-natal vitamins and now have a healthy baby girl – all because of you.

I could go on and share another story about a middle-class family that doesn't look like they need help, but is making it because of you. I don't share this to get you to donate. I would love for you too, but that's not the goal. The goal is to show you that the grace of God continues to come, and that God in Christ is breathing through your work. You are a Co-Creator with God, God invites and welcomes you into this creative and uplifting work. Our call is to share and live into our collective mortality, because I know we have felt broken as a humanity and aimless as Saharan dust. But that's not who we are. We are the dust bonded by the water of new life, solidified by the cup that overflows, and connected not to see a mortal end, but an immortal beginning. In the name of Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer, the One Living Triune God. Amen.