

Ash Wednesday 2021

February 17, 2021

Earthen Vessels

Shepherd's Grace Church

"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. <sup>2</sup>"So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>3</sup>But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup>so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

<sup>5</sup>"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>6</sup>But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

<sup>7</sup>"When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. <sup>8</sup>Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. <sup>16</sup>"And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>17</sup>But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup>so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

<sup>19</sup>"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; <sup>20</sup>but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup>For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. ( Matt. 6: 1-6, 9-21)

As we begin our Lenten journey this day, we come recognizing that which we are. We are earthen vessels. We are made strangely and wonderfully, but we are made with a fragile kind of care. We are created out of the elements around us. We are created in the same way that God created the heavens and the earth. There is an expression that I cannot remember who first coined, but I love the phrase. "We are made of the dust of the stars!"

All that has come into creation has come into creation by the single and uncaused act of God. God spoke and "All things came into being." All things came from nothing and from nothing God created everything. Physicists would tell us that with a single exception, there are no

uncaused causes. There are no actions without equal and opposite reactions. This one action, however has caused all things to come into being and all things include us.

You can break down our composition as human beings. If you do, you will find that we as individuals exist in approximately the same proportions as our environment. We are about 70 Percent water and we have the other elements of the earth and the stars in representative quantities to about the same proportion as our created earth. We are earthen vessels. We are fragile and we are frail and we are filled with the elements from which we are created.

We are but ashes and dust. "From dust we have come and to dust we shall return." As earthen vessels, knowing from where we have come, we can also with confidence know to where we will return. In John 13, it is written that Jesus knew the hour had come for him to return to God, and knowing that he had come from God and that he was returning to God, and with this knowledge he stood to serve others.

Our journey in this Lenten season is to recognize where we have come from and where we are going. We are but ashes and dust. But the ash and the dust that we are has come from God and is returning to God! Our journey then is a return to God! It is a Holy Journey, and one which we should not undertake lightly! It is a special and taxing and difficulty journey, but it is a satisfying journey for those who choose to take it. It requires sacrifice and it requires commitment, but it leads to a place of promise and purpose and passion!

As "Earthen Vessels," I invite you to join me in the journey. Much of the journey we make will be made as individuals but all of the journey we make will be as individuals traveling together. We come from many different paths and from many different places but for these next 40 days, we enter on to this path together. We begin as we look to the scripture passage I shared with you today.

Jesus says, "Take care not to practice your acts of piety in front of others." While we want to be an example to others of the kind of life and love God desires from us, we do not want to be a people who judge others by our standards and embarrass them as we seek to live a more upright and holy life. Indeed, our uprightness is only fully realized when we share all we have with others by coming along side them and walking with them for a ways.

When we make our offerings, therefore, we are not to announce our intentions. We are instead, to humbly approach the altar and acknowledge that everything we have comes from God. We are but ashes and dust, earthen vessels, who apart from God have nothing. Our gifts are like our journey. They come from God and they go to God. It is God who will determine their purpose and how they are to be used. It is ours to give and give as generously as we possibly can.

We are called to give in secret because we are all unique in this journey. We all have different gifts and abilities. Our gifts are not to be seen as individual privilege, but rather as a collective

offering of all that we have together to bring to God. Some bring money, some bring time, some bring prayer and some bring other things; all of these things essential to the journey and to the coming of the kingdom. We, therefore, do not let our left hand know what our right hand is doing so that our individual gifts remain secret but our collective gifts are combined to approach the coming glory of the Kingdom of God, and are to be used when combined so that that Kingdom may come according, not to our own or individual plan, but to God's plan for us.

We are to be in prayer regarding the coming of this Kingdom. We are to pray together and for common purposes but we are also to pray separately for the gifts we have been given, that they might be used not for our own purposes, but for God's purpose. For this reason, we pray in secret. We separate ourselves for a time, even when we are together. It is for this reason that when we pray in worship, we set aside a time of silence so that we can lock ourselves in the secrecy of our own mind and pray for those things which remain unspoken in public.

These things are our most intimate and personal treasures. They reflect our hopes and wishes for ourselves and for others. They are not named openly, but they are laid open at the altar of God so that God, who hears in secret can know our prayers in secret and answer them.

In "The Book of Secrets," the book we are studying at Bible Study on Wednesday evenings, Jonathan Cahn talks about the power it takes to answer prayer. When we pray, Cahn says, we create a new future in a new past. Our prayers for this moment require God, who is not bound by time, to accomplish past events that will lead to the ability for God to answer our prayers in the present and so those prayers can be completed in our future. This new eternity must be melded together for all of creation and for all of time, but most importantly, for a single purpose, for the coming of the Kingdom of God!

The physical effect of God's action is called a prolepsis. It comes as a cause. There are no uncaused causes except for creation, and therefore, they come with an anamnesis. This is a remembering. It is an action observed in physics as a fundamental fact in the action of the universe, and it is practiced by God as God breaks in to our time to reveal that which God is going to accomplish in the future.

God, therefore, answers our prayers in secret and gives our reward in the past so it can be revealed in the present and praised in the future. All of time belongs to the one who creates time, God, and our prayers invite God's generosity as time is altered to allow God's answered prayers. All of this happens in secret, but is to be praised in unison as an acknowledgement of God's giving to us as far greater than anything we could ever give to God!

The ashes we imposed today were from the fireplace in our basement. You did not see the wood that was burned to make the ash. I told you that the wood was burned and you believed because you have seen wood burn before. You know that the end product of wood burning is ash. Therefore, you accepted the ash as a fact. It is the same with God in prayer. You have witnessed God's answered prayers before. If in no other way, in the way of Jesus,

His Son. Because you have witnessed, you can believe and trust what is going to happen. The prolepsis, the inbreaking of God into the present to hear your prayers and alter time to answer them is the result of your faith in that which you already know. During our Lenten journey, the opportunity is to believe and walk in this faith.

As a way of maintaining our focus, we are asked to take on new tasks and to surrender or make sacrifice of some pleasures. These two initiatives invite us to recognize more frequently the desire God has to walk with us, to share life with us and to love us even more completely. One of the most common measures of sacrifice is called the fast.

Fasting is an abstinence. It invites us to do without! It invites us to give up willingly, to trust in the Lord for some of our need so we can ultimately learn to trust in God for all our needs. When we fast, when we do without food for a period of time we find our mind longing for that which we have determined to do without. We think of food and we desire it. We look at the clock and it seems to move slowly. We can't wait till the time has arrived when we can enjoy that which we have for so long done without.

The challenge of a fast is the motivation. Are we fasting so others can see us or are we fasting so we can keep our focus on God. There are some people who do like to engage in a fast and they do so regularly. They walk around telling others how much they are giving up. They walk around with a contorted expression on their face. Their purpose in the fast is to gain recognition for themselves, not glory for God.

God invites us into a different kind of fast. He suggests that we fast in much the same way we pray. When we do not let others know what we are doing in our sacrifice, then we can focus on the true meaning of the sacrifice. We can think about how we can gain a closer relationship with the Lord. WE can give thanks to God for giving us the strength we might otherwise gain from food. We can learn that we truly do not "Live by Bread alone," but we do live on the words that come from the mouth of God!

Living by God's word invites us to focus on that word, to listen to God! It invites us to think of things we do not usually think of. Instead of thinking of lunch time or snack time, we can think of God time. God time is that time when we think about how we can love God more, how we can help and love our neighbor more. It is that time when we can be about the work of sharing and giving.

If we were spending that time eating, we might be tempted to withhold from others so that we would have enough. Sacrifice reminds us that it is not the food that sustains us but God, the one who provides the food that sustains us. The food does not then become our focus, but rather, the one who provides the food is our focus. Our journey becomes less a burden and more a chance to grown in service.

That Growth then becomes the second component of our Lenten season. As we grown in God, we desire to share that growth. That sharing is called love. During the Lenten season, our opportunity is to look for ways we can learn and share God's love. We can read, we can pray, we can volunteer. It doesn't really matter what we do except that it must be something we are interested in doing. When we take on something that interests us, we realize that we meet God where we are. God's presence deepens our understanding and invites us to do more. It is a privilege and not an obligation.

The work we do in the Lord can often be seen in this way. It is a privilege to love and serve the Lord. This privilege, this new found energy becomes our motivation. It becomes our treasure. It becomes that which we can hold on to. Treasures of our old self, the treasures of this world become like these "Earthen Vessels" of which we are created. We recognize we cannot take them with us and that they will ultimately return just as we do to ashes and dust.

Our memory of service to the Lord however, will be a reminder even into eternity of the something more that God truly wants us to be. While we are ashes and dust in this world, there is one element of our creation that is unique. It is that uncaused cause.

Because the uncaused cause has no beginning, it also has no end. It transcends life in this world. It transcends ashes and dust. It even transcends the dust of the stars. The uncaused cause is that which gives us life. It is the breath of God.

When Adam was just dust and ashes, there was no life in him. It was only when God breathed into him that He had life. God's breath is known in Hebrew as "Ruach" It is breath, but it is also wind and spirit. In this case it is God's Spirit, breathed into us! Our life comes from God's Holy Spirit, an uncaused cause which has no beginning and no end. For this reason, we can take this Spirit with us into eternity.

As we make this Lenten journey, let us remember that the journey is more than just a walk. It is a season of growth in God and an season of stepping from these "Earthen Vessels" into heavenly promises. It is God's Grace given to us in God's desire to form a relationship that lasts past this lifetime! Amen!