

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“We Make the Road by Walking: Dust Matters”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Genesis 2:4-25, Mark 12:28-34

She was gathering a crowd. Cindy had gone out to wash the windows at our home in Pampa in the Texas panhandle. We had not lived there long and since Cindy is not a fan of dirt and dust, she decided they needed cleaning. As she wiped the windows a number of our neighbors wandered over, watched her for a few minutes and then asked, “So what are you doing?” A bit surprised by their question, she answered, “Cleaning my windows.” “Why?” they responded. “Because they are dirty,” Cindy continued, “why do you ask?” With a bit of a smile they said, “You’ll see.” We were both a bit perplexed about their response, until a few days, or maybe weeks later, I was out in the backyard with the kids when I looked at the horizon and all I could see was this massive, grey-red wall. I wasn’t sure at first what it was. Then I realized that it was a wall of dust; a dust storm barreling down on us. Cindy and I went into action trying to ensure that our house was sealed...but to no avail. The dust came in under the window sills, the doors...everywhere. And those clean windows...well they were not very clean any more. At that moment, Cindy was even less a fan of dust than she had been before.

I would guess that many of you feel about dust the way that Cindy does...not a fan. It bothers our sinuses. It gets all over our furniture. It is irritating. Even so, this morning I want to offer you a different perspective on dust...that dust matters in a way most of us never considered possible...that dust is the stuff of connection. It is what connects us with everyone and everything in the world around us.

First, dust connects us with all of humanity. In our story this morning we read of God taking dust and forming man, and here I mean man, since God forms Adam, or man of the ground, first. For many of us this is a nice throw away story. Sure, sure, we say, God formed man from the dust of the earth, now let’s get to chapter three and talk about the snake and the apple. Yet if we do this, if we pass by this story of the dust, then we miss one of the most important aspects of the scriptures; and that is that all human beings are people of the dust; of the same dust. Rabbinic tradition tells us two very important things about the dust. First it tells us that God gathered dust from all four corners of the earth in order to form man, so that no person could say, “My father is greater than yours.” Second, the writer of the story does not describe Adam’s color. It is said by the scholar Rashi that “the first human being is neither white nor black nor brown nor yellow. Rather drawn from the whole earth, Adam’s dust represents all the variegated colors of the human species. No one is prior to another, neither higher nor lower. Every human being is created equally in the image of God.”¹ See dust is what we all are...the same dust. Thus we are all equal. We are all connected. We are all God’s.

Second, dust connects us with the creation itself. When we read this story, we are often focused on the creation of Adam or Eve, or perhaps on the order of creation since it is different from the first

¹ Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki 1040-1105), quoted in The Torah of Reconciliation, Sheldon Lewis, Green Publishing House, 2012/5772

story, or that man is given the responsibility to care for the garden (some things never change...we have to go to work). Again when we do so we often miss that Adam is not the only thing that is created out of the dust. Right after Adam is created the writer tells us that, "Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil." Later, when God decides Adam can't hack it on his own and needs an ally, God forms from the dust all of the animals of the field, and the birds of the air. God then forms Eve from Adam, so that as the rabbis say, man and woman would be formed from the same material, thus making them one; neither superior and neither inferior. Where all of this points us is to the fact that we are not above creation. We are not greater than creation. We are part of it. It is from the dust that all of creation comes; humans, plants and animals. We are all one.

Where this leads us then is to Jesus and his discussion about the greatest commandments. When asked to name the greatest commandment Jesus offers the standard rabbinic answer, that we are to love God with all of our of heart, soul, mind and strength. And that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. His questioners agree with him...and they do so because these commandments are based in the creation story we read this morning. First we are to love God because it is God who formed us from the dust of the earth, breathed into us the breath of life and set us in the world; in other words, we love God because of what God has done for us. Second we are to love our neighbor as ourselves because, well, our neighbors are us. They are of the same dust as are we. There are no distinctions.

I wish I could say that loving God and neighbor was easy; that it was easy to look at all other human beings and see them as being of the same dust as are we. Yet I know it isn't. It isn't because the cultures in which we grow up teach us to make distinctions; to see some people as better than others; some people as more worthy of our love than others; some people as more important than others. Yet if we allow the dust to speak; if we allow the scriptures to speak, we will find ourselves called to see and to respond to the world differently. We will see ourselves called to all people as made of the same God-created dust.

My challenge for you this week then is this, to ask yourselves, how am I striving to view every human being I meet or see, as made of the same stuff of which I am made; the dust of creation, and therefore helping me love them as my brother or sister in God?