

*The Facts of Life*

Psalm 51:1-17 & Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

February 14, 2024 || Ash Wednesday

Min. Lee J. Schriber, Minister of Engagement & Discipleship

Mount Vernon Place UMC, Washington

Will you pray with me?

Opening Prayer: “God, Adonai—we breathe in...and we breathe out...and on this Ash Wednesday we remember your Ruach, your Spirit, with which you brought order to the chaotic unknown and breathed life and love out from dust. With each breath in...and with each breath out...we remember from where we have come, from dust to life, and to where we shall return from life to dust. And while we are yet alive we remember that we are filled with your Holy Spirit, which draws us close to you, which draws us toward repentance, which calls us to believe in the Good News of Jesus Christ...And God with each breath in...and with each breath out...we are reminded of that same Spirit all around us, reminding us of our interconnectedness—as we breathe the same air as our neighbor, as we are wrapped in a blanket of breath that binds us in community. With each breath, O God, do not let us forget from where that breath has come, what your breath has done, and with whom that breath is shared.” Amen.

Where is God...now?

I invite you to take a moment...

With your eyes...look about you...where is God in what you see?

With your ears...listen to the waves of sound that surround you...where is God in what you hear?

With your mouth...remember the tastes that you have experienced today...where is God in what you have tasted?

With your nose...inhale and take note of what fragrances linger on the air...where is God in what you smell?

With your body...notice the ways in which your body is encountering the world around you...where is God in what you touch and feel?

On this Ash Wednesday, this Valentine’s Day, this “Ashentines” day, this you “can’t spell Valentine’s without Lent” day—how are you sensing God? As we begin this Lenten season, what are your senses telling you is present—and what are your senses telling you is missing?

For many of you...you may have a much easier time answering that second question: “what are your senses telling you is missing?”—In this often melancholic season of penitential preparation, perhaps you are already missing the taste of that treat you have pledged not to consume for the next six weeks, perhaps you are already missing seeing that comforting social media app on your phone that you have deleted for this season, perhaps you are missing something much dearer like the embrace of a loved one. Or perhaps it is instead the

presence of something, that is causing you to notice something missing from your life, the smell of your grandmother's perfume or the sound of your father's favorite song. Tonight we encounter the paradox of knowing that yes, from dust we have come and to dust we shall return, but also that oftentimes life lingers on in the hearts and memories of those who loved us and those we loved.

On Ash Wednesday, we are reminded that from dust we have come and to dust we shall return—this is a fact of life. That we were born, and we will die. And yet, on this day we are also given instructions, and we are reminded that we are more than dust, that in the liminal space between dust before and dust after, there is so much more than dust, there is life—and there is love.

The words “from dust you have come and to dust you shall return” are typically paired with the words: “repent and believe the Good News”—speaking directly to the truth that there is life between dust. There are pleas for mercy between dust. There are requests to be made clean and whole between dust. There is the belief that God can create in us a clean heart and put a new and right spirit within us between dust. But there must also be repentance between dust—an honest accounting of the ways that we have failed, an acknowledgement that we need to be cleansed from sin, that we have done what is evil in the sight of the Lord, that our bones have been crushed, and that our hearts are broken by our own transgressions and failure to live up to our own highest ideals. Only when we have repented can we experience life and love again. Repentance, in fact, sets us free from the bondage of our worst mistakes and liberates us from the anxiety of consequences hanging over us that have not yet come to pass, giving us a path forward, perhaps not an easy path and certainly not one without accountability, but nonetheless a way forward. Without repentance there is no hope of mercy, we cannot ask for forgiveness for that which we cannot admit we have done. I believe this is a fact of life. Our repentance allows us to attempt to practice faithfulness between dust.

Hearing Jesus' cautioning words in Matthew 6, “beware of practice your piety...before others in order to be seen...”—calls to my attention that believing the Good News cannot simply be about belief alone, about believing the correct things about Jesus, nor about our reverence, religiousness, or practice of piety...our practice of faithfulness cannot be measured by anything other than our seeking to faithfully respond to the Good News of Jesus Christ. These cautioning words echo the psalmist in Psalm 51 pointing to the fact of life—that empty religiosity and performative prayers, empty almsgiving and performative fasting, empty offerings and performative sacrifices, would not be pleasing to God. Yet, while Matthew 6 seems to demand the secret practicing of faithfulness, Psalm 51 invites us to sing aloud of God's deliverance...to open our lips and use our mouths to declare praise to God to one another in community. And so, with Psalm 51 in mind, I am not wholly convinced that Jesus' words in Matthew are meant to isolate us from community as we seek to practice our faith,

and that our piety is only faithful when it happens out of sight of community. Instead, I believe that we are oftentimes more faithful when seeking to practice faithfulness in community, rather than when we try to go it alone. And when I read these texts, I mostly hear a call to sincerely offer our full messy beloved selves to the practice of faithfulness—regardless of who sees or hears—not allowing others’ perceptions, positive or negative, to dictate how we seek to practice faithfulness, how we love God, or how we love our neighbors.

And so, as we seek to “repent and believe the Good News” together this evening, I cannot help but be reminded that the Hebrew word for repentance implies a literal turning, a 180-degree shift—and so, on this Valentine’s Day infused Ash Wednesday I don’t want to miss the opportunity to take a moment to turn toward love...to know that in between dust, there is repentance and there is mercy, there is confession and there is liberation, there is faithfulness and there is love.

“Dust to dust” is a fact of life, but it is not the only truth. Northern Irish poet, Pádraig Ó Tuama, has this to say about the facts of life in his poem titled “The Facts of Life”:

*The Facts of Life* by Pádraig Ó Tuama<sup>1</sup>

That you were born  
and you will die.

That you will sometimes love enough  
and sometimes not.

That you will lie  
if only to yourself.

That you will get tired.

That you will learn most from the situations  
you did not choose.

That there will be some things that move you  
more than you can say.

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<sup>1</sup> From “Sorry For Your Troubles” by Pádraig Ó Tuama (Canterbury Press Norwich, 2013).

That you will live  
that you must be loved.

That you will avoid questions most urgently in need of  
your attention.

That you began as the fusion of a sperm and an egg  
of two people who once were strangers  
and may well still be.

That life isn't fair.  
That life is sometimes good  
and sometimes better than good.

That life is often not so good.

That life is real  
and if you can survive it, well,  
survive it well  
with love  
and art  
and meaning given  
where meaning's scarce.

That you will learn to live with regret.  
That you will learn to live with respect.

That the structures that constrict you  
may not be permanently constraining.

That you will probably be okay.

That you must accept change  
before you die  
but you will die anyway.

So you might as well live  
and you might as well love.  
You might as well love.  
You might as well love.

And so...hearing these words—knowing that you were born and you will die—that you will probably be okay—that you might as well love—that you might as well love—my prayer is that as you leave this space tonight you will resolve to spend the next 40 days paying attention to the ways in which you are sensing God through sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch—and to seek to turn toward love, with the assurance that despite it all, when our efforts to be faithful serve God more than it serves ourselves, we will probably be okay—and so we might as well live and we might as well love, dust to dust, ashes to ashes.

Amen.