

Ash Wednesday 2019, March 6, 2019, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

In ninth grade I wanted to be an archaeologist. So my parents sent me to a camp where for a week I dug around in the dirt. This site consisted of an old house, long since fallen down and buried by time. The professionals had already located the midden, which is a fancy archaeological term for trash pit, which in most cases also served as the outdoor latrine. Into the pit went broken pottery, bits of bone from meals, and just about anything else discarded from the house. Archaeologists learn a lot from trash pits; what people ate, how they dressed, how they cooked and survived. So for a couple of weeks over a couple of summers I dug around in someone's long forgotten outhouse.

I wonder if some archaeologists a thousand years from now will dig around in our landfills to discover what we were like today. The trouble is, at least here in Lancaster County, the vast majority of our trash doesn't go directly into a landfill. It's first sent to the Resource Recovery facility in Conoy Township where it's burned for fuel. 400,000 tons a year is burned and turned into 90,000 tons of ash which is then sent to the county landfill at Frey farm. No archaeologist is going to discover whether we preferred Turkey Hill ice tea over Liptons because it all will be turned into clean, sanitized, out of sight dust and ash.

We don't want to think about our garbage and refuse. As long as it's hauled away in clean trucks, and we don't need to be bothered with odors and noise and pollution we are happy to be rid of it all.

Thinking like this is not bad. But it's also a symbol and sign of a spiritual reality in our lives. We do not want to be confronted by the reality of our own culpability, our responsibility for the way our lives turn out. We fix blame elsewhere. And if we aren't entirely blameless, we are never as bad or as wrong or as responsible as the person over there, in the newspaper, the one who wrongs us or hurts us, the other guy in the other political party. Our dust is clean. Our ash is sanitized and filtered, processed in clean, state of the art hearts.

Even if what I say to you has the ring of truth, you are probably here this evening knowing it's not really true. But you do know it's often the way of the world; to try to cleanse and sanitize that which we can't do on our own. We realize the waste and sorrow of our lives is not merely someone else's fault entirely, but also involves our own actions and responsibility. No matter how hard we try, or how much we want to keep the world from peering into the workings of our heart, we know that God sees. God sees deep into those reaches of our hearts and lives, our attitudes and behaviors which hurt others and frighten even ourselves. Our failures, our failings, "things done and left undone," we say. The false judgments,

apathy and negligence; all of this refuse burned in the fire of God's righteous and holy judgment.

We wear the ash of God's judgment upon our brows. Before the ash is returned to the earth, we touch it upon our foreheads, as sign and symbol of where we have come from, of what we have become, and where we are going. We cannot sanitize our failures. We cannot haul our negligence and apathy and false judgments away in clean green trucks to a pristine processing center. We stand before God, wear the ashes of our lives humbly, sorrowfully, and say, "Have mercy on me, O God...in your great compassion blot out my offenses...wash me, and I shall be purer than snow."

The ashes of our mortality, the ashes of God's judgment, point us towards the one who stooped to our level, into the dust of our existence and took on for himself the dust of the earth in his own body. The Holy One of the Father, his own Son, became dust for you and for me that he might lift from us the burden our sin and the threat that this mortal life is all there is. In his cross Jesus stands with us in dust and death; not far off. But near. He wears the ashes of our lives on his own brow, who experienced the judgment of the world and of God, whose sign is traced on our brow, not in ash, but in the healing and cleansing waters of baptism. In Jesus Christ we are washed clean by being joined to his death and resurrection.

Tonight is about turning, and returning. Turning to the one whose cross is traced on our brows, both in ashes and baptism. Returning to the God who fashioned us from the dust of the ground, abounding in a steadfast love that shall never leave us. Honestly naming our condition before God, not hiding away in a sanitized delusion of our lack of responsibility. Trusting in the mercy promised, the clean heart given, the joy of salvation restored. Amen.