

# Re-Member

February 14, 2024

## Re-Member

One of the hazards of being a pastor is you turn everything into a ritual. Carrying out the trash becomes a ritual of confession, as I contemplate what I need to let go of. Similarly, doing the laundry becomes a ritual of repentance and conversion, as I pray about needing to spend extra time scrubbing away the stains of life and later folding things up to make order out of chaos. Hiking unknown trails and coming to a fork in the road becomes a symbolic ritual of choosing between two goods, and marinating dinner becomes a ritual of allowing new and varied thoughts and ideas to soak in.

So it should come as no surprise that planting seeds is a ritual action for me. For the longest time, I had a tradition of planting seeds on Good Friday, putting something that appears lifeless into the deep, dark earth, trusting that new life would result. Not quite resurrection, but something symbolic to turn not only my logical mind but also my imagination toward the dynamics of death and resurrection.

But this year, I'm going to plant some seeds early. My ritual imagination is drawing a parallel between the dust we smear on our foreheads tonight and the dirt I'll put in cardboard egg containers. Remember you are dust. Re-member. Put back together. Put yourself back together – differently.

Remember you are dust is a humbling phrase, and it is supposed to be. Humble and humus have the same root. Humbling grounds us. But the correction that so many of us need is that remember you are dust, while humbling, is not meant to be humiliating. To humiliate is to cause a painful loss of pride, self-respect, or dignity; in contrast, humility means having a modest opinion of one's own importance. Lent is a time to reassess what has grown disproportionate in our lives and make correction. In my ritual planting this Lent, I intend to remember I am dust as I re-member myself, as I invite God to help me put myself back together in a different way.

This new take on an old ritual came to me as I prayed with a poem by the Rev. M. Barclay, one of the founders of the LGBT writers group, enfleshed. As I nestle the seeds in the dirt, my prayer is to ground myself in the promise that we come from holy soil, we are created good and in need of tending, rich with potential for beauty, hungry for nutrients. Vulnerable. Often in need of pruning. Barclay notes that dust receives the dead. And I would add that nutrient-rich dirt yields the fruit we need to continue the circle of life.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus uses the metaphor of planting. He says, "Lest a grain of wheat fall to the earth and die, it remains just a grain of wheat." On this Ash Wednesday, that inspires me to embrace the transformative, fruitful nature of this season.

## Lent

That begs the question as we step into the season of Lent, what in your life needs to fall to the earth and die? What needs to be pruned, to become part of the soil once again, so that it can be re-membered, re-fashioned, re-configured into something different? How might that which seems dead and lifeless in our beings be returned to this sacred earth, so that the Divine can work her magic once more, creating life out of death, order out of chaos, justice out of privilege?

I'll share that poem from M. Barclay that is inspiring my new ritual, but before I do, I always feel like it's important to remind people of what Lent is NOT. So much of popular religiosity looks at Lent as a divine diet, a mid-spring (or this year, a late-winter) restart on our New Year's resolutions. It is nothing like that. Lenten fasting, if that is part of your spirituality, is not about self-mastery. It's not about self-control. Our God wants changed lives, not a change in our waistlines or TV viewing habits.

Ash Wednesday could be re-named the Feast of the Second Step – admitting that a higher power is in control and can breathe sanity into our lives once more. Ash Wednesday, when observed correctly, serves as a corrective to the profoundly mistaken idea that at the heart of the Christian gospel is the doctrine of karma rather than that of grace.

Karma says that what goes around comes around, that if I do xyz, xyz will come back to me. Grace says that despite doing xyz, despite straying and sinning, God loves you deeply, profoundly, and is not just WILLING to take you back, but is actively seeking renewed relationship with you. Grace is the hound of heaven, seeking us out, hunting us down, refusing to give up on us. Grace is coming to understand that God first loved us and that is our motivation for a changed life, not the other way around.

Therefore, Lent is a time for us to spend a little extra time with God, set aside some of the crutches, the coping mechanisms, the buffers, to make some room to let God's healing grace in. That's a tall order. All too often, we'd rather wear ashes on our foreheads than have someone ask why your mascara is smeared and your eyeliner is running, why there was that catch in your voice when you picked up the phone.

God says come to me with weeping and mourning. Come to me with your heart breaking and cold and fragile and spent. Come to me from that numb place that you've been self-medicating that doesn't even know if it is lovable, and I'll show you! Rend your hearts and not your garments, the Joel prophet said. Rip open your heart and let God do with it what God will because your heart of stone isn't serving either of you.

### **Conclusion**

The black sooty cross that we wear on Ash Wednesday is ultimately a sign of love, for it is love alone that conquers death. Among the rubble and ruin of Wednesday's ashes is a black, organic substance that marks us as God's own beloved. It's a prescription, a blessing – God says, "I made infinite joy out of that device of torture, I made the whole human race out of dust and breath. Tonight, let me go to work because there is something extraordinary I can do in your life, too."

My prayer this year is that this season will be a long, drawn out re-membering in each of our lives, a planting of seeds in the womb of the earth, a returning of that which is no longer lifegiving to the earth, that God may re-member us, and this world God loves so much.

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**Joel 2:12-17a; Psalm 51:1-12; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**  
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It's not at all about the need to think of ourselves as awful.

For many of us, that already comes too easy.

If you don't need a smear across your forehead  
because you wear it on your heart every day  
hear these words:

You are not awful.

God doesn't think you're awful.

You were not created awful.

There's nothing divine that is born from believing you are awful.

If this is hard for you to accept, to believe, to hold deeply in your smeared heart,

spend some time with that this season.

You have been lied to.

Heal.

Resist.

Unlearn those prayers that make you small.

Come alive again before you remember death.

But then, when you do,

when you remember you are good,

don't settle for believing the journey is complete.

It was never only yours to begin with.

Let it lead you to question:

Why do we,

who are so good,

turn on each other?

Why do we,

who are so good,

allow for evil to flourish

through white supremacy

or patriarchy

or poverty

or queer and transphobia?

Created good.  
Created good.  
Created good.  
    But collectively invested in evil.  
        In its stories.  
        In its profits.  
        In its familiarity.

To re-member  
    is sacred work.  
Let the re-membering  
    that we are dust  
        and to dust we will return  
    be a reckoning with our inseparable lives and deaths  
May our re-membering  
    be an apology for all we have chosen instead of each other  
    be a grounding in the promise  
        that we come from holy soil.

Holy dirt.  
Holy dust.  
Created good.  
In need of tending.  
Rich with potential for beauty.  
Hungry for nutrients.  
Wild and unruly.  
Vulnerable.

Dust births new life.  
Dust receives the dead.  
In the dust  
may God transform death into life once more  
today...or eventually.

– Rev. M Barclay (adapted by BMFD)