

Ash Wednesday 2016

One of my earliest memories of Ash Wednesday
is my old-school childhood pastor, Father Henkel,
 placing ashes on our foreheads at my Catholic grammar school:
Remember thou are dust and to dust you shall return.
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Over and over with the same cadence he prayed that prayer.
It doesn't sound very prayerful as I say it,
but I realize that for him it may well have been a kind of mantra,
 the kind of prayer that you can repeat over and over
 without ever exhaust its meaning.
Thing is, I wasn't crazy about that old-school ashing:
I didn't like being called dirt (since that was what dust was to me),
 and I certainly didn't want to be reminded
 that's how I would end up.
Then again, I've found when I have reaction like that,
 God may be trying to remind me of something.

Or help me remember: Remember, thou art dust...
Remember is not a bad word to start out Lent with:
An encouragement to remember who we are before God:
made in the divine image, holy and beloved,
remade in the image of Christ in our baptism.
Isaiah helps us remember that God has invited us to be partners
 in the care of the world, in creating justice.
Isaiah even reminds us of the names God gives us when we do:
"You will be called 'repairer of the breach,'
 and 'restorer of streets to live in.'"
Those are names I'd like to remember, so I could call them my own.

The call to remember is especially a good one
in this time when our society seems to have forgotten so much
about our duty to the poor and the oppressed,
in a state that has abandoned its duty to those in need,
or a country in which presidential candidates seem eager to forget
the dignity of immigrants or of Muslims or of the poor.
Remember—there's a word for Lent alright,
so that God can remind us who we are.

And who we are? Thou—"Remember thou..."
Not you, as in "hey, you," not you as in "you screwed up,"
not the you of blame or shame.
No, it's "thou," like tú in Spanish, or du in German,
the "thou" that you use with someone you know,
with someone you love.
That's how God addresses us: the God who made us,
the God who looks upon us in our fullness,
those things that we think are gifts and strengths,
those things what we see as weaknesses or shadow,
those things that the world out there labels
in all sorts of unhelpful ways.
God loves our "thou" in our fullness,
and calls us very good.
Remember, thou—God rejoices and embraces all of thou.
Not a bad thing to remember in Lent.

Which brings us to the dust—
the "dirt" of my childhood imagination.
But the word is "dust," not dirt,
and we are a certain kind of dust, after all.
St. John's just celebrated Darwin Day,
an opportunity to celebrate the gifts science
offers to us on our spiritual journeys.

And it is science that reminds us that the dust of which we are made
was born in the stars.

It took three generations of them over billions of years
to make the atoms and elements that make us possible.
God waited 10 billion years to see our stardust take shape
and come together and find our voices,
so that we could join the eternal song of love and praise.
Remember, never ever forget, thou art stardust.

“And to stardust thou shall return.”

Is this last line just a reminder of our deaths?

Do we need that reminder?

I can see in front of me space that used to be stardust,
thous I knew and loved: Marilyn, Richard, Bob.

It's not their deaths this prayer calls to mind for me,
but their “return,” the return they gave in life of God's grace,
the unique ways in which their “thous,”
their stardust reflected God.

Theirs was the reflected return of God's glory
that only their unique thous could bring forth,
before they returned to the source that created them.

Perhaps that is one of Lent's calls to us.

To remember who we are:

Thous beloved of God, stardust reflecting God's glory,
so that we can give the return
of praise and love and mercy and justice and compassion
that only we can give in our thous, through our stardust.

Remember, thou art dust and to dust thou shall return.

Father Henkel was on to something:

It is a mantra, the kind of prayer that never runs out,
not just on Ash Wednesday, not just in Lent,
but for an entire life of faith.