

**Ash Wednesday
Holy Comforter Church
The Rev. John E. Shields
February 17, 2010**

“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

“...to dust you shall return.”

I wonder what color dust I will be.

I wonder if my dust will better than your dust.

Could it be that my dust will be somehow distinctive?

Might my many accomplishments be somehow obvious in my dust?

Sounds kind of silly doesn't it?

It is silly.

Dust is dust right ---?

I remember the services we used to do at the Forsyth County jail.

All those men and sometimes women are dressed alike. You can't tell by looking at them why they are in jail.

**The murderers look just like the shoplifters,
The burglars look just like the embezzlers,
The rapists look like the forgers,
The drug dealers look like the muggers.
And the innocent look like the guilty.**

When we went to the jail and read the scripture, said the prayers and consecrated the bread and wine and distributed it to the inmates...when those folks then went to have hands laid on them and prayers for healing said over them, no one asked “What did you do?” --- “Why are you here?”

We didn't give them a test to see if they are worthy to receive our good services or participate in this service.

We just did it.

I believe that must be the way God looks at us.

When God looks at us --- God doesn't look first at our sins and our shortcomings, God looks and sees a precious child and loves us.

God gives himself to us without qualification. God loves us all the same --- like dust is the same.

Lent is a time to remember that God loves us all.

Lent is also a time to remember that we often don't feel loved or worthy of love. Does that say something about God?

No!

It says something about us.

The things that separate us from God, keep us from feeling and knowing God's love are our sins. Those things in “thought, word and deed” those things “...done and left undone.” These are all those things that separate us from God and separate us from one another.

Lent is that special time that the church sets aside to give us the opportunity to examine all those things that separate us from God and one another.

This is why fasting, study, prayer --- self examination are recommended --- that is why ‘giving up something’ is helpful, because it is to remind us --- by our denial or doing without --- to focus on ourselves and our relationship with God.

We begin this season today/tonight by all putting on the same sign --- ashes in the sign of the cross. Those ashes are our great common denominator. They are our reminder that we are equal before God and that we are all loved by God.

Rowan Williams, on the occasion of his enthronement as the 104th Archbishop of Canterbury said: “No one can be written off, no group, no nation, no minority... We cannot assume that any human face we see has no divine secret to disclose...”

We spend so much of our lives trying to differentiate from one another --- to be better than, richer than, smarter than, brighter than, stronger than --- It is what our very competitive culture teaches us from the beginning.

Tonight we engage in a counter cultural exercise --- we acknowledge and even celebrate our common humanity and our innate equality before God.

These ashes are our uniform. Just like those jailhouse clothes – we all look alike. These ashes are our uniform. They say that regardless of our many sins and offenses, our many differences and problems --- God loves us and we hunger to know that love.

Remember you are dust...and God loves dust!