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St. John's Lutheran Church – Kimball, NE (dual parish w/Immanuel, Burns, WY)

Maundy Thursday

April 1, 2021

Text: John 13:1–13; 31b–35

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Our Lenten devotion began on Ash Wednesday with ash smeared across our foreheads with the words, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” Those are humbling words. Genesis records that God made man, the first Adam, from the dust of the ground (Gen. 2:7). Every human being conceived and born since bears the same nature as Adam, not pure spirits like the angels, but flesh and blood born from the earth as well as soul. For God breathed into Adam's nostrils and Adam became a living soul. Every human being, from the moment of his or her conception, is fearfully and wonderfully made, as Psalm 139:14 says. Body and soul you are. Enlivened dust that is body and flesh with an immortal soul. So, the next time you stand outside, look down to the ground and “remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

Both phrases tend to trouble us human beings. Human beings, the pinnacle of God's creative work, find their origins in the dust of the ground. Hardly the exalted material we might wish for ourselves. Why not the material of stars? Or something supernatural with all kinds of special qualities? Almost anything more exalted than dust. The idea offends our sensibilities, dare I say it, our pride. Have you noticed the number of movies and stories about people seeking to transcend the limitations of the natural body? Human consciences uploaded into computers. Or evolving into a purely spiritual existence without the bounds and limitations of this finite, circumscribed body. And, it seems, we have a love-hate relationship with our bodies. Aren't we constantly trying to change it? As if we're discontent with it. But we also give it a great deal of attention as we spend enormous amounts of resources on it, as evidenced this past year with Covid-19.

But the second half of that phrase bothers us even more, “To dust you shall return.” That's the sentence of death, the judgment of God spoken against sin from the beginning. Genesis 3:19, “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” This too offends our sensibilities, that primal, natural desire to live. Have you noticed the tendency of our society to gloss over the harsh truth of death? People are

hesitant to say a person has died. Instead, they've passed away or gone home or have gone to a better place. But the truth is, the life that animated a person is gone. He or she has died. God's Word tells us that death is God's just judgment against sin. Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

The Bible teaches how to understand the meaning of our origins in the dust and our return to the dust. Such wisdom is found in the Lord Jesus Christ. The wonder and marvel of the Christian Gospel is the revelation that God Himself became man; the eternal Son of God, the 2nd Person of the Holy Trinity, became the dust of the earth. The Lord Jesus Christ is fully and completely God with all the divine attributes and qualities of divinity, equal to the Father and the Spirit, in all respects. At the same time, He is fully and truly man, born of his mother Mary in this age with all the attributes and qualities of our human nature except without sin. Isn't it a true wonder that God did not think it below His nature and dignity to become one of us, to become dust of the earth with a full complete human nature, a body and soul united with God in one person, our Lord Jesus Christ.

I mentioned earlier that we humans seem to have a love-hate relationship with our bodies. We're constantly caring for it, nurturing it, fussing over it one way or another. But then we're always trying to change it. Make it thinner, heavier, stronger, faster, this shape as opposed to that shape, younger, older. Now, many are wanting to change their gender or to refuse gender altogether. Further discontentment with their human nature. While we nurture and care for it, we wish it were something more or at least different. But the Son of God, the Lord Jesus did not consider our human nature with all its limitations and finitude to be something that needed changing. Our creation from the dust of the earth is perfectly good as God intended it from the beginning. God is our creator.

Jesus didn't become man in order to make us super-humans like all the superhero stories of ancient and modern times. No, he became the dust of the earth like us so that the power and sting of "and to dust you shall return" may be nullified and brought to nothing. The Son of God became one of us in order to give answer to the problem of sin leading to death. Because of Jesus, death is transformed from "to dust you shall return" to the hope of the resurrection unto life everlasting.

When God's Son became man in the person of Jesus, God the Son humbled himself by taking on the form of a servant, says Paul in Philippians 2:7. And both Matthew and Mark described Jesus' ministry as the Lord coming "not to be served but to serve,

and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45). The Lord Jesus did not consider it below His divine dignity to become dust of the earth like us nor did He consider it unfitting to become the servant of all that He might redeem the world from the devastation of sin and death leading to “dust you shall return.”

On the very night of our Lord’s betrayal, Jesus served His squabbling, glory-hungering disciples. From John 13 we learn that Jesus laid aside “His outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him” (vs. 4–5). God in human flesh, the perfection of humanity, became the servant of all. He willingly and lovingly took upon Himself the menial task of washing dirty feet. In their pride, the disciples thought it below them; they did not serve one another in love, not even the Lord Jesus. The Lord’s humility in service initially offended Peter who said to Jesus, “You shall never wash my feet’ (vs. 8a).

The Lord Jesus turns all of our sinful, human pride on its head and teaches us the truth of how things really are. Being dust of the earth is good; your human nature consisting of body and soul is good and beautiful in God’s eyes. We would do well to transform our thinking and living to conform to the Lord’s teaching and receive what He has given us graciously with joy and thanksgiving. We ought to be careful and wary of attempts to change the very fabric of our human nature. Rather, let us by the grace of the Holy Spirit confirm our lives and thinking to follow the path of the Lord Jesus. For He not only became human like us but He is the perfection of humanity, the dust of the earth perfected. True God and true man.

In the beginning, we were created in God’s glorious image which was broken by man’s original and actual sin. That image has been restored and perfected in us through Christ Jesus who took upon Himself our nature and also, at the same time, became the servant of the world to ransom every human being from sin and death. Christ Jesus came to this earth, took upon Himself our human nature in order to destroy the work of him who has the power of death, that is, the devil. The manner in which Jesus did this great work not only included Him becoming perfect man but also the perfect servant.

God the Father’s way of redeeming us from the power of death and Satan is through the humble, loving servitude of His beloved Son, Jesus. As the servant of servants, Jesus bore our sins. Healed our diseases. Touched and cleansed lepers. Washed the dirty feet of His disciples. Suffered and died for the world. Salvation from death and

the grave can only come through the humble Son of God washing our dirty bodies and souls with His own blood. At first, Peter was too proud to receive such humble service from His Lord and Master. Until Jesus said, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me” (vs. 8). Then, thanks be to God, Peter wanted everything Jesus was offering, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head” (vs. 9).

The options are clear. Rescue from death, the grave, and hell only comes through the humble service of Christ’s death and resurrection. The question for every person since...will you receive Christ’s loving service or seek something else? Jesus chooses to give His redemptive love through His Word – read, heard, studied, and preached, and through His Sacraments – baptism poured over sinners, words of forgiveness spoken to broken consciences, and Christ’s very body and blood given under bread and wine in Holy Communion. These are the means of rescuing us dust born creatures from returning back to dust with no hope of resurrection unto eternal life. Either receive them, as Peter enthusiastically did, or have no share in the salvation promised in the Lord Jesus.

Tonight, we especially commemorate Christ instituting the Lord’s Supper for us and for our salvation. In this way, Christ Jesus continues to serve us even though His is risen from the dead and rules and reigns over the entire creation from the glory of the Father’s right hand in the heavens. Because of Christ’s humble service, we no longer fear death, hell, and the grave. For Jesus is resurrection and life. Everyone who believes in Christ Jesus, though he die, yet shall he live. And everyone who lives and believes in Christ shall never die (John 11:26–26). Christ Jesus has transformed death so that death, must now serve us when, where, and how Christ chooses. Christ Jesus is death’s master. Now risen from the dead, death must serve Jesus, the Lord of life.

Remember that you are dust. And that is a very good thing. Christ became dust too. Through Him our human nature is redeemed and restored. Remember that to dust you shall return. But now with the hope and promise of resurrection unto eternal life. Tonight’s meal is the divine feast of life. Christ’s divine life served to us by the Lord Jesus Himself. “I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord.”

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.