

## Ash Thursday

Let's begin this time of reflection in prayer. God, we give thanks for a faith community gathered on this evening at the threshold of the season of Lent. Be with us as we let the words of our ancestors in faith wash over us once again this Lent. Amen.

Beloved friends, this evening marks our entrance into the wilderness of our Lenten journey – forty-five days of preparing our hearts to be touched once again by the events of Holy Week and Easter. I hope that we will open ourselves to the fullness of this season. It holds great potential for nurturing our spiritual growth, both as individuals and as a congregation.

I have heard our reading from the prophet Isaiah in a new way this year. Would you please show me with a nod of your head if you have found yourself in a conversation anytime in, say, the past year in which you heard yourself or the other make reference to oxygen masks on an airplane? This happens to me with fair frequency. Most often, one of us is trying to nudge the other toward habits of self-care, wanting the other to prioritize filling their own reservoir with rest, self-affirmation, recreation, and whatever else effectively sustains us. This generosity with care toward ourself equips us with greater capacity to care for others.

I believe that a faithful life begins with love of self, ripples out to care within a household or close friendships, and then further out to our relationships in the wider community. I would say that relationships within a congregation (a house of faith) fall somewhere between household or close friendships and the wider community.

Let's hear again Isaiah's take on how we live out God's love. We heard:

*"If you remove the yoke from among you,  
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,*

*if you offer your food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be like the noonday.*

*The Lord will guide you continually  
and satisfy your needs in parched places  
and make your bones strong,  
and you shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring of water whose waters never fail."*

I wonder at the start of this Lenten season: **how often do we drop heavy yokes onto our own shoulders, point an overly critical finger at ourself when we misstep, and feel a harsh sense of judgement toward ourself?**

Moving outward in a ripple toward household and close friendships, I also wonder this: have you recently heard yourself thinking, **"wow, I exercise so much more grace toward a coworker or a friend at church or in my book club than I do with my partner or child?"** Or have you heard yourself thinking, **"wow, my partner or child exercises so much more grace toward their coworker or friends than they do with me"?**

By practicing more grace with ourselves – releasing those yokes, unpointing those fingers, we can be more resilient in the very tough work of practicing it within our households and with our closest friends. And by practicing grace in those relationships of deep trust and vulnerability, we can be more resilient in advocating for a more loving society that centers the experiences of those who have been marginalized.

Let's turn for a moment to our scripture reading from the gospel of Mark. We heard:

*"Beware of practicing your piety before others to attract their attention; if you do this, you will have no reward from Abba God in heaven..."*

*But when you pray, go to your room, shut the door, and pray to God who is in that secret place, and your Abba God—who sees all that is done in secret—will reward you...*

*[S]tore up treasures for yourselves in heaven, where neither moth nor rust can destroy them and thieves cannot break in and steal them. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be as well."*

Jesus' words reinforce for me the teaching of Isaiah for our entrance into Lent 2024. We need to find ways to be in *"that secret place"* with the Love of God. We need so many moments of grace in the forms of quiet, restful activity that welcomes us to be fully with our own beautiful flawed selves, restoring us for the work of loving the other.

A singer songwriter friend named Erika Lockett died a few years ago. She once wrote a song entitled, "Dust," which conveys an understanding that we are deeply connected to Earth and all of creation. Those of us gathered in this Sanctuary this evening will be invited to receive imposition of ashes as we depart from this time of worship. The ancient ritual of imposition of ashes reminds us of our interconnectedness and of our strong, vulnerable, beautiful, compassionate nature as human beings.

Erika's son "Dust" is about leaning toward the spacious embrace of Love that is more powerful than all of the hard things we do experience. I encourage you hold your hands in an open posture as you receive these words of encouragement.

These lyrics and Erika's voice have embraced me with the Holy Spirit at times when I have felt low on courage in this work of being human – that is, being embodiments of God's love.

Erika sings:

*“It's like stepping off a hundred-foot pole  
It's like holding your breath, holding your breath  
Then letting go.  
It's like giving in to the bottom giving out  
It's like giving up, giving up  
Precious doubt.  
How does it feel skipping rope with your fears?  
Laughing as you fall  
Can you see it all intertwined,  
Tangled vines  
Twisted lines?  
We are handfuls of dust  
We are pieces of sky  
We are thundering silence answering why we are”*

This Lenten season, may we each seek out spaces and practices that will support us in making space for God – the source of Love - to embrace us with grace throughout the season so that grace might ripple outward and without end.

Friends, God's love is with us as we journey. And that love is counting on us to embody it each day. Amen.

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Isaiah 58:1-12, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-20