

This year, as opposed to most, Ash Wednesday falls on Valentine's Day, creating an interesting dichotomy between the cold darkness of a winter's night and the warm light of love shared. As a former Kansas Citian, home of Hallmark, it pains me to say that in this case Ash Wednesday trumps the Hallmark holiday. However, it does not mean there are not some areas of overlap which the Worship committee has sought to draw out. On Ash Wednesday, we dare to speak the truth because love demands speaking the truth. On Ash Wednesday, we are reminded that we are a part of something so much bigger than ourselves. We are dust and to dust we shall return. We are stardust, comprised of elements of the universe molded together over eons, molded together by a force bigger than we can even begin to imagine, a force we call God, whom we have come to know as Love. Love breathed into the timeless elements and from the dust, our ancestors emerged. Each one of us lives and breathes and has our being as a result of the intersection of so many miracles we will never be able to count. The love who is God, lives and breathes in and through us.

The reminder that we are dust and to dust we shall return, according to Dawn Hutchings, frees us from delusions of grandeur. We know that this life, as beautiful as it is, is still fleeting and there comes for everyone the day upon which they die. The problem is that there is much in the 21st century which is geared towards negating that fact – everywhere we look, the world tries to convince us we are invincible, we can live forever if we just do this or do that. There is so much which is a distraction from the reality that one day we will die and those distractions are anything but loving. Those distractions have nothing to do with love because they have nothing to do with truth. There is an Irish expression which translates from the Gaelic into something like: "We will all be lying down in the earth for about 15 million years and we have only a short time here; a brief collection of moments. If that isn't motivation for each and every one of us to live everything that is within us, then perhaps we have already died." Preoccupied by our distractions, we forget that we are a part of something so much bigger than our minds can grasp – all because we have a God who is LOVE, who creates love and who sustains love. Each one of us was billions of years in the making and every molecule of our flesh will continue to be for billions of years to come, albeit in a different shape or configuration. Who and what we are is beyond our ability to comprehend but that doesn't prevent us from being grateful for our time here on earth and trying to live every moment we are given to the fullest. Unfortunately, distractions whatever they may be keep us from doing just that. If there is a sin, an obstacle that we must all confess as humans, it is the sin of a life unlived as the God of LOVE created it to be lived. Our fear of the unknown causes us to settle for less. And each time, we settle for less, God's heart is broken. God's heart breaks when we settle for less love, less wondering, less imagining, less dreaming, less reality, less life, and yes even less eternity.

On this Ash Wednesday, reality meets us again to tell us that although the distractions might try to make us feel safer, they are continually breaking God's heart. They continually separate us from the truth that from dust we came and to dust we shall return. It is owning this truth deep within us that helps us to live more fully, to live more completely here and now. Breaking God's heart is an ongoing pattern of humanity which we will explore over these next 40 days. Another branch of the imagery we will explore is found within the positive

ramifications of breaking hearts. I know, you didn't know there was a positive aspect to breaking hearts. But we find it within the text read earlier from the prophet Joel: "Rend your hearts, not your clothing," which is another way of saying, "break open your hearts." As Steve Kindle reminded me, there is a Sufi phrase which says, "break open your hearts again and again and again... until they remain open." Until they remain open - Hearts which have been broken open are more receptive to life and less threatened by vulnerability and dependence upon God. Hearts that are open are more free to share love rather than squelch it. Hearts that are open are more receptive to following Jesus on the path that leads through death to resurrection.

On this Ash Wednesday, I invite you to simply sit with the knowledge that death will one day return us to the dust from whence we came. Allow yourself to mourn that truth, to let your heart break for missed opportunities, to regret the failures and the pain and then take a long, slow, deep cleansing breath. It is in that breath that we find our hope, for LOVE resides in that breath, that wind, that spirit. LOVE put the breath of life into your dust-formed body and LOVE will be there when we breathe our last. Find the freedom that comes from breaking open your heart rather than breaking the heart of God. Remember that LOVE teaches us that at the very heart of all that is, we are part of something more than we can even begin to imagine. So embrace eternity if you dare. Rejoice in the freedom that the knowledge of our death can bring. Do not settle for anything less than the magnitude of each and every moment. For we are dust, molded and shaped by LOVE, for LOVE, and to the dust we shall return. Amen.