

“Earthly Matters”

Genesis 2:1-8; 1 Cor 15:45-49;
Phil 3:15-21; Matt 4:1-4; John 3:27-36

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Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

In the Genesis passage this morning, we heard about God finishing the general creation and thinking about creating human beings. The question I have is: does God really get God’s hands dirty? It talks about God taking dirt and forming it into a human being. Did God wash off his hands afterwards? As we think about that, God probably doesn’t really have hands, at least not like ours. And yet there’s this sense in this scripture of God forming humankind out of the stuff of earth and breathing life into it.

Think about who we are. I think we often like to take the first chapter of Genesis and think of how it says we are made in the image of God. We would love to hold onto that. But in this passage out of Corinthians – I don’t think I’ve heard it talked about too much – we are the image of Adam. We say on Ash Wednesday “from dust to dust” as we make the sign of the cross with ashes on each person’s forehead. We recognize a certain sense of our own earthiness; we are of the earth. I don’t think we should forget that.

When we think about what we might know, we know something that we have done before or that fits with us. So, if you’ve been doing an occupation for a while, you know how to do it. But if you walk into a new occupation, you really don’t know exactly what’s happening. I think about going to the first job at a new place. You have all these things you might imagine it will be like, and then you go and find out the realities. Some of them might be what you imagined and some of them probably weren’t.

The more we know about something, the more likely it is that we will be able to imagine it. But as we talked about last week, we may not be able to imagine God. It might be beyond our ability.

There’s a certain earthiness to who we are. It’s what we know. And so, it makes sense that we know all about things of earth, that we study it, that we go on and find out more about it. We know a lot about earth. We know how to do things. We know how to make houses and keep them at pretty much one temperature all the time. We know how to make all kinds of things. We have cars and we expect them to work each time we get in, and they generally do. If they don’t, it helps some people have jobs. But we generally think that we know things are going to work. Is all of life that easy to wrap our hands around? I’m going to suggest it’s not.

We know something of earth and the things of it. We study it. But there’s a place where I think we struggle. We can keep the house at a regular temperature, but how about our relationships? How easy is it to keep our relationships on an even keel, the same temperature all the time? How often do we have to go through a freeze/thaw cycle or deal with the heat of anger? How much of the time do we struggle with the very relationships we form?

I think one of the things we tend to do because of that struggle is we can constrict the relationships we have so that we just have relationships that are easy to get along with; we see things the same way. Or when we can't do that, we set up particular ways of doing things. We talk about professionalism. We know how we are supposed to act in certain circumstances as a professional, for example. Or with certain people there's a cultural experience. We know that when we go to particular places we know we have to put on our game face to be the right person for that circumstance.

Most of us know that when we get away from that we want to let our hair down and be ourselves. Then, as I begin to think about being myself, I realize that even there I begin to struggle a bit. Sometimes internally I struggle with who I am. Am I good enough? Did I do this right? What about the things I don't think I'm doing right? How do I look at my own identity and who I am?

So we can have both external struggles and internal struggles, and I think it has to do with the fact that we're not only earthy or earthly – Adam, after all comes out of the word for “earth” – we are not only in the image of Adam, but we are in the process of transitioning into the image of Christ. God comes to us to help us know more about what it means not only to be earthy, but to be those whose God has breathed the very breath of life into.

If you think about what Jesus talks about in the Sermon on the Mount, it's almost all about our relationship with God or with each other. It's interesting to me how little time Jesus spends telling us about the nature of the world or the nature of God, but he does tell us a lot about the relationships that we have and how those might work out—our relationship with God and our relationship with one another. God loves us and we are to share that love. Perhaps our relationships are the realm of life in which we express the breath of life given us.

I think when we focus on our earthiness, life can get hard. Isn't that what Jesus is being offered in that first temptation? In that first temptation he's being told, “You have this earthly desire for food. Use your spiritual power to give yourself food. Use your relationship with God just for food, just to focus on the earthy side.” Jesus doesn't say he's not hungry. No, he says, “I don't live by bread alone.” He's not saying, “I don't live by bread,” he's saying, “I don't live by bread *alone* and I need every word of God.”

The temptation here is to make ourselves two different things. I think Jesus is saying, “No, I'm both. I am an earthly being who needs bread, but not over and above the need I have for the word of God. Not over and above. I shouldn't just use God to give me my earthly stuff.” There's a way in which he is inviting us to recognize that we are both, and it is integrated together. When we listen to God, God will lead us into that kind of life that is alive, that is full. We care for our physical nature and the life-giving spirit.

We know all about the earth, but we may not know all about what we call the spiritual side. In some ways I wonder whether our psychology and our spirituality struggle

because we make it too earthly and we have no sense of God's presence, the breath of God that's working its way out in us and how, as we follow Christ, we are being transformed. Our citizenship eventually may not be here on earth at all, but in the time we're here we are invited to put the two together and to hear how Christ calls us into a life that is about sharing our lives. It's about caring for one another and caring about God. It's not just turning rocks into bread. It's not using our spirituality just so we have our earthly desires, but recognizing that God has instilled in us his breath in a way that leads us into relationships with one another, that helps us be part of something that's bigger than us. We begin to have our citizenship in heaven, is the way it says it in John.

So it's more than just earthiness. The two go together – the physical and the spiritual – and God invites us to live that out now, following Christ, living both on the bread God gives us – actual bread – and the word of God that leads us, sustains us, and gives us life. So as we enter into Lent, I invite you to think about that. Listen again to the word of God and see and reflect on that word, that our sustenance is both our daily bread and God's word to us, God's word among us, the Spirit at work.

Let's pray:

Lord, it feels very easy for me to be really focused on the earthiness of our lives: our physical natures, the things we can actually get our hands on and do, the ways we can fix things. And yet, there's something about living together that takes us beyond the simple earthiness of our lives and connects us to our citizenship in heaven. It works its way in and through our lives, into our relationships, as we figure out how you are showing us the way in those relationships – to be righteous, to be in right relationship with one another, and to love one another. Lord, let us hear your word that we might truly live through its guidance. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.