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Ash Wednesday 2014

I recently received an email in my inbox asking me to fill the ziplock baggie in my son's backpack with dirt from the backyard. "Please do not send store-bought dirt", the email instructed. The kids apparently are looking at dirt under magnifying glasses. Over breakfast on the morning of the bag-filling, the kids hypothesized what might be in our special backyard dirt in addition to dirt. Woodchips, rocks, sticks, seeds, leaves, worms... I cut off the discussion just as they remembered the presence of our two dogs.

Dirt is made up of a lot of stuff, as I'm sure Chuck could tell us when he's wearing his geologist hat. Any parent who does laundry in Georgia can tell you that Georgia dirt has a very specific color that doesn't wash out of white soccer uniforms without a fight. That's the iron oxide in the clay. Gardeners like it about as much as launderers, but gardeners do like the rich dark soil that comes from composting, made of the eggshells, celery ends, potato peels and coffee grounds, all rotted down into dirt.

On Ash Wednesday, we are forced to recognize our dirt-ness. We profess that we are dust-- a lighter, airier term for dirt—and that we will return to it. This dirt-and-dust is made very real around here every time we bury someone in our cemetery outside. The dirt hole, with its strata of clay and soil amendments is the returning place for the ashes that we leave behind when we leave this part of our journey. We very literally return the dust of the ashes of our mortal bodies into the dirt below our feet.

The idea on this day that we are dust is meant to remind us that we are insignificant, as common as... well, dirt, and as ubiquitous. We are earthy and earth/*ly*, not yet made of heavenly stuff. That we are and will return to dirt is not intended to be a hopeful statement, but a reminder that we are not God. We are mortal.

But my recent thoughts and discussions about dirt have taken me somewhere else this year. We are dirt. No arguing that. In the opening days of creation, our Bible tells us, God created us out of... you guessed it... dirt. We were lovingly created, holy and blessed, out of the materials that God had on hand. But this all knowing and all powerful God could have created us out of anything: Gold, steel, diamond, chocolate... but in God's wisdom, it was dirt. Common, ubiquitous, but purposeful.

I can't help but believe that there is a reason that our biblical history has us coming from the stuff of the ground. And keep coming back to this: much like dirt, we are each one of us a complicated mixture of all kinds of things. We have influences and emotions, histories and relationships that grain by grain, molecule by molecule, make up who we are.

We are made up of iron oxide, some of us, and coffee grounds, we are leaf litter and worms. We are some of us so hard-packed and bone-dry that it is hard to dig down and see what we are made of. Others who have cultivated and nurtured themselves might find that the dirt they are made of is good for all kinds of growth. Some of what we are made of us good and rich and strong, some of it is hurtful and damaging. We are none of us homogenous, but, like the dirt from which we come and to which we will return, we are complicated, layered, constantly being added to and just as constantly being used up.

Today marks the first day of Lent. We often talk around here about Lent as a time for reflection and introspection, about laying ourselves bare to our own scrutiny, about figuring out those things that are disrupting our spiritual lives and getting in the way of a fulfilling relationship with the God that is always reaching out for us.

What if, as part of this introspective work, we were to take a good look at our dirt. Just as my first grader is using his magnifying glass on the backyard dirt, what if we use the magnifying glass of Lent to take a close look at what we are made of, to sift through and figure out what needs to be nurtured and what needs to be... uh... scooped and tossed.

We are dirt. Not just on Ash Wednesday, but every day. And while I hesitate on this day in particular to rescue us from the low, heavy feeling of admitting our dirtiness, complicity, sinfulness, I do believe that we can benefit from better understanding what it means to be of dust and returning to dust. Not frightening or depressing, just another part of who and how God created us to be.

Because anyone who has been to an Episcopal burial knows that as the dust of our mortal bodies meets the common and holy dirt of the ground, we make our song, a song that we are not to sing in Lent, as song we sing with the saints and angels, a song reserved for the heady, heavenly days of Easter, when the complex, earthly dirt of who we are is traded for heavenly incorporeality of who we were created to be. Even at the grave we make our song.