

REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE DUST

GENESIS 2:7; 3:19b;
LUKE 12:16–21



Dirt is the essence of humility: utterly common, carelessly brushed off, literally trampled underfoot. The spiritual practice of humility begins with the realization that we *are* dirt. As God said to the first human (words echoed in the Ash Wednesday liturgy), “you are dust, / and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19b).

There is a physical sense in which this is true. As creatures of the earth, we are composed of basic elements—oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen—common to all life forms on the planet. All of these are also found in soil: a mixture of water, air, organic materials, and minerals. Our lives depend on these earthly elements, and when we die, they return to the earth.

But this is also true in a spiritual sense. Remembering that we are dust means remembering that we are the earthly children of a heavenly God. We are finite; God is infinite. We are mortal; God is immortal. In short, God is God, and we are not. The path to walking humbly with God begins with an understanding of the difference between creature and Creator.

The fact that we are less than God may sound like bad news, as though God is far removed from our reality. However, the good news of the gospel is that God created the earth, God loves the earth, and God is at work to redeem the earth, drawing all of creation into an eternal embrace. As Christians, we come to know and trust this good news through Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh. Christ has come to dwell among us—heaven come to earth—to save us from sin and death, transcending and transforming our finitude and mortality.

To remember that you are dust is to stand with awe and wonder before the Creator of heaven and earth, to come into God’s presence with humility. As God said to Moses at the burning bush, “Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Exodus 3:5). Remembering that we are dust, we might even

say that, by the grace of God, *we too* are holy ground, rooted in the earth that is our home.

A prayer by the medieval mystic and church leader Catherine of Siena expresses her great humility before God. The imagery of the prayer seems to allude to the bush that “was blazing, yet it was not consumed” (Exodus 3:2). The prayer also draws on the meaning of the divine name revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures: YHWH, “I Am,” or “God Who Is.” Notice (below) how Catherine presents herself to God, remembering that she is dust.

- What is your relationship with dirt?
- Do you love to garden, getting your hands dirty and spending hours in the soil?
- Do you love to clean, keeping your home or workplace neat and tidy?
- What does this relationship with dirt have to do with your life before God?

- Have you had an experience that caused you to confront your finitude or mortality?
- What have you learned from that experience?

O high eternal Trinity!
O our redeemer and resurrection!
O fire ever burning,
O light-giving light:
you are the One Who Is,
and I am the one who is not. **Amen.**
—Catherine of Siena (1347–1380)¹

1. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 1110.

FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE

THIS HUMBLE, HUMAN LIFE

If you simply start at the beginning of the Bible, it doesn't take long to stumble upon the subject of humility. The book of Genesis opens with two stories of creation. The first is a lofty litany, a poetic and prayerful account of God's creative work, patterned after the seven days of the week. But the second is a highly humble, all-too-human tale about frail and fallible people grasping after knowledge and falling short of the glory of God.



The storyteller of this second creation narrative uses clever wordplay to make a point about human humility. It's difficult to appreciate in translation, but the Hebrew word for human, *adam*, shares a root with the term for soil, earth, or ground, *adamah*.

Notice the relationship between those two words in the following passage [with Hebrew transliterations in brackets].

In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no vegetation of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one [*adam*] to till the ground [*adamah*], but a stream would rise from the earth and water the whole face of the ground [*adamah*—then the LORD God formed man [*adam*] from the dust of the ground [*adamah*] and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man [*adam*] became a living being.

—Genesis 2:4b–7

Together, these related terms for *human* and *ground* appear more than 900 times from the first to the last books of the Old Testament, with every instance underscoring the theme of human humility. Since we have come to think of *Adam* as a proper name, we tend to forget that the Hebrew simply means *human*—or better yet, *earthling*. (As Genesis 3:20 suggests, the name *Eve* is similar to the Hebrew word for *living*.)

God places this first human in an abundant garden, granting permission to eat the fruit of its trees, all except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God makes a partner for the human, and together—with a little encouragement from a crafty serpent—they decide to sample the fruit of the forbidden tree.

Note the true nature of their offense. This is not about pilfering produce. As the serpent astutely observes, their sin is seeking to “be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5). Grasping after the glory of God is the opposite of humility. The creatures want to become the Creator. They fail to remember that they are dust.

So the Lord pronounces judgment. And the wordplay continues.

And to the man [adam] he said, / . . . / “By the sweat of your face / you shall eat bread / until you return to the ground [adamah], / for out of it you were taken; / you are dust, / and to dust you shall return.”

—Genesis 3:17a, 19

As this story reveals, this humble, human life requires that we scratch out a living for ourselves on the surface of the earth, the same soil from which we are formed, the same dust to which we will ultimately return. This is the nature of our creaturely existence. Yet the story concludes with a note of grace, as God sews garments for the first humans, wrapping them in compassion. True humility is understanding that, in life and in death, we rely on God’s mercy.



- How does it change your hearing of the Genesis story to understand that the Hebrew word for human (*adam*) is related to the term for earth, soil, or ground (*adamah*)?
- How does this biblical wordplay help us to remember that we are dust?

YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU


Jesus tells a story about a wealthy landowner who forgot his humble humanity, using *creature comforts* to deny his creaturely condition.

Then [Jesus] told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

—Luke 12:16–21

Instead of sharing his abundance with others or offering it in God’s service, the rich man decides to keep it *in the bank*. He builds bigger barns to contain his worldly goods, anticipating a long life of luxury. But when his life is cut short, it turns out this was all in vain.

As with the couple in the garden, the story reveals a lack of humility, a failure to “remember that you are dust.” A telling detail is the way the rich man talks to himself, addressing his own soul as though he is his own creator: “relax, eat, drink, be merry” (Luke 12:19; see similar phrases in Ecclesiastes). He has forgotten that he belongs to God and lives in a world where others hunger and thirst. For this reason, all his earthly efforts have gone to waste.



➤ What are some of the treasures you have tried to “store up for yourself”?

➤ How do these efforts inhibit your relationship with God and care for your neighbors?

➤ What is the difference between hoarding resources and good financial planning?

➤ What do these things have to do with humility toward God and others?

FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW

ASH WEDNESDAY

In every service of Christian worship, we have the chance to practice walking humbly with God. But at the opening of the season of Lent, the Ash Wednesday liturgy presents us with an annual opportunity to reflect more deeply on the themes of finitude, mortality, and humility.

Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent with a public act of confession. Acknowledging that we have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory, we repent and return to our loving creator. Acutely aware of our failure and frailty, we express our utter reliance on God's saving grace.

Ash Wednesday developed in the medieval period as a time when penitent sinners were presented for church discipline during the season of Lent, to be reconciled with the community of faith on Maundy Thursday. Ash Wednesday also came to be the occasion for new believers to enroll in the *catechumenate*, a period of preparation for baptism at Easter. For those who undertake spiritual disciplines, Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the Lenten fast.

Ashes are an ancient symbol of repentance, sorrow, and sacrifice. Traditionally, the ashes for this service are made from the palm branches of the previous year; thus the ashes and palms together frame the season of Lent.²



ASHES AND PALMS

2. *Book of Common Worship*, 247.

The Ash Wednesday liturgy always includes Psalm 51, the quintessential prayer of humility before God. The psalm begins with a cry for grace: “Have mercy on me, O God, / according to your steadfast love; / according to your abundant mercy, / blot out my transgressions” (Psalm 51:1). Looking within, the psalmist finds much to confess: “I know my transgressions, / and my sin is ever before me” (v. 3). So the psalmist pleads for the forgiveness and transformation that can come from God alone: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, / and put a new and right spirit within me” (v. 10). This is the song of one who remembers that they are dust.

As we enter the season of Lent, we also remember Jesus’ forty days of temptation in the wilderness. The devil presents Jesus with three tests of humility. As the Son of God, fresh from his baptism and anointing with the Holy Spirit, Jesus certainly has the power to turn stones into bread, leap from the temple spire, or command the kingdoms of the earth. But he refuses the devil’s enticement to use God’s gifts for personal gratification, glory, or gain (see Matthew 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13). In the dust of the wilderness, Jesus teaches us how to remember our relationship with God and remain faithful to God’s calling.

➤ Have you observed spiritual disciplines during the season of Lent?

➤ What have these practices taught you about humility?

➤ How do they impact your relationships with God and others?

FUNERALS

Another time in Christian worship when we face our finitude and mortality is at a funeral, also known as a Service of Witness to the Resurrection. Again, the images of ashes and dust are prominent. This ancient prayer, adapted from a Byzantine hymn of the sixth or seventh century, is a beautiful expression of humility before God.

You only are immortal, the creator and maker of all.
We are mortal, formed of the earth,
and to earth shall we return.
This you ordained when you created us, saying,
“You are dust,
and to dust you shall return.”

**All of us go down to the dust;
yet even at the grave we make our song:
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.**³

Notice how the prayer contrasts human mortality with divine immortality, a poignant reflection in the context of the funeral service. It quotes the second creation story of Genesis, with God’s words to the human, “you are dust, / and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19), evoking the liturgy for Ash Wednesday. But then something unexpected happens; the prayer makes an abrupt shift from Lenten lament to Easter alleluias. We remember that “all of us go down to the dust.” Yet we rejoice that Christ goes before us, rising from the dust with the promise of eternal and abundant life. This is our witness to the resurrection, even in the face of death.



Think about a funeral you have attended.

- How did the words, actions, symbols, or images of the liturgy express humility before God?



“All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.”

- In what ways might a life of humility bring joy?

3. *Book of Common Worship*, 792–93.



PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

START ON THE RIGHT FOOT

The first step in walking humbly with God is to remember that we are dust. This is, by definition, an uncomfortable practice of faith. It means confronting our limitations and losses in this life. It means confessing our faults and failures before God and one another. It means facing the fact that we are all going to die.

Maybe the best place to start is with our feet. They are, after all, closest to the earth. Take off your shoes. If possible, go outside. Sit or stand for a while with your feet firmly planted. Feel the soil beneath you, its temperature and texture. Think about all the other living things—animals, insects, plants, and microbes—that live on and in this earth. Remember that you *are* dust, like everything else, and to dust you will return.

Some Christian monastic groups have practiced humility by giving up fancy footwear, either by wearing simple sandals or by actually going barefoot as they walk through the world. They are called *discalced* communities (from the Latin word *calceus* for “shoe”). Examples of *shoeless saints* included St. Francis of Assisi and St. Teresa of Ávila. Pilgrims on sacred journeys sometimes choose to walk barefoot, at least for the final steps of their pilgrimage.

For those who are able, the practice of walking itself can be an act of humility. Eschewing the comforts and conveniences of modern transportation can be a valuable spiritual discipline. Walking helps to keep us grounded in the cycles and seasons of nature, in the lives of our neighbors, in the challenges of our communities, and in the human condition, with all its sweat and soil. Walking is also a way of caring for earth that is our home, avoiding modes of transport that contribute to climate change. Yes, walking takes a bit more time, but this can be time well spent, an opportunity to reflect on the time and space we occupy on this earth.



- How does it feel to be barefoot: the good, the bad, the ugly?
- How does being barefoot change the way you move through the world?
- What do these feelings have to do with humility before God and others?

How might you start a habit of sinking your bare feet into earth and walking if you are able? You might keep a walking journal. You might do this in a paper book or with notes, voice memos, or videos on a smartphone. Write what you notice about nature, about neighbors, about your community, and about yourself. What do these observations have to do with walking humbly with God?

GET YOUR HANDS DIRTY

You can't remember that you are dust without getting your hands a little dirty, literally and metaphorically. Practices of humility often draw us into closer contact with people, places, and things we might otherwise seek to avoid. Humility is knowing, in the deepest sense, that we are all members of one human family, all residents of one fragile planet, all beloved creations of God. This spiritual union transcends soil and sin.

Gardening can be an excellent opportunity to get in touch with the earth and remember that we are dust. Whether you are growing flowers, fruit, vegetables, or herbs, spending time in a garden is a chance to give thanks to God for the gift of the earth and to prayer with and for the whole creation. Claim and celebrate these moments as times of prayer in the presence of God.

Service to and with others is another important practice of humility. You might work at a shelter for people who are unhoused, a soup kitchen, a food pantry, a clothing closet, a home renovation project, a thrift store, or some other neighborhood service agency. All of these are opportunities to remember our common creatureliness and care for the basic needs of others.

In a figurative sense, humility also means recognizing the individual and systemic ways in which we bear responsibility for the injustice, violence, and corruption of the world. As Paul wrote in his letter to the church at Rome, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). None of us can claim that our hands are clean. All of us have a part to play in establishing equality, ending oppression, and caring for creation.



- How can practices of purity or self-protection sometimes trip us up in the desire to walk humbly with God?
- Why does true humility require getting your hands dirty?
- When, where, and how do you get your hands dirty in service to and with others?
- How can these activities help you to remember that you are dust?

FOLLOWING JESUS

Jesus says, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:19–21). This passage from the Sermon on the Mount is often read on Ash Wednesday. Much like the parable of the wealthy landowner in Luke 12, these words of Jesus underscore the ephemeral quality of human existence. Everything on earth will pass away. Only God is holy. Only God is eternal. Therefore, we must put our trust in God alone.

But just a little later in the same chapter of Matthew, Jesus also says, “Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them” (Matthew 6:26). Jesus continues, “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?” (vv. 28–30).

We are dust, and to dust we will return. But God loves the dust. God made the earth and all its creatures. And God is at work in the world, redeeming and transforming creation. This is the good news of the gospel. Walking humbly with God means being the beloved creatures of earth that God created us to be.

For a closing reflection, watch the YouTube video “O Love That Will Not Let Me Go (Tune: St Margaret—4vv) [with Lyrics for Congregations]” (bit.ly/FMOLove, 3:13) and sing or pray the lyrics.⁴

4. George Matheson, “O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go,” in *Glory to God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), #833.