

You are Dust
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New Yorker cartoon: man on his deathbed, dying in his bedroom at home. Bedroom is spare, with nothing but a bed and a chair in it, almost monastic. His dying words are:

My only regret is that I didn't buy more stuff.

Today is the day we celebrate our mortality. Oddly, for those who practice Ash Wednesday, one of the most moving moments of the church year is when the priest (or kids) marks your forehead in the sign of the cross, and declares, you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

This message, and the message of the New Yorker cartoon, is the message of Ecclesiastes: that all is vanity under the sun.

The stuff we collect; the titles we collect; the money we collect; the wins, as in successes, we collect -- even our successes in the name of God or religion, as Jesus points out in the Ash Wednesday Gospel reading, can be vanity.

All is vanity under the sun -- for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Yet, of course, all is not vanity under the sun. The write was wrong. There is one thing: the choices you make, and the love you live, matters. Who you become in life matters. It matters that you engage good relationships with those around you, that you give yourself away to others --

It matters the people in your life are more to you than the accoutrements in your life.

You are dust -

In Judaism, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are twin holy days, set apart by about ten days. On Rosh Hashanah, God inscribes your name into one of three books for the coming year:

One for the totally righteous, and these are immediately inscribed by God in the Book of Life;

One for the totally wicked, who are immediately inscribed in the Book of Death;

and

One for -- well, the rest of us -- and this book remains open for ten days; you and I are held in suspension, until the holy day, Yom Kippur.

During this time, we are called to seek forgiveness from both God and humans – to put our spiritual and relational house in order.

Indeed, the faithful find those whom they have wronged to make amends. And they find God, for the same purpose, to make amends.

The hope, of course, is that through repentance and atonement, their names will be transferred to the Book of Life.

Ash Wednesday is our version of Yom Kippur. Faithful Jews take this exercise seriously, and they take personal responsibility for their relationship with God and others.

You are dust, or in Kurt Vonnegut's words, You are mud sitting-up.

Mud sitting-up, with only one thing in life that proves not to be vanity, after all, and that is the life you lead, the love you exercise.

Very few, if any, people die with the regret, I'd wish bought more stuff, but many, many people die with the regret, I wish I'd loved more, spent more time with my kids, restored the relationship with my mom, or just been a little more selfless.

Today, Ash Wednesday, with the mark of death and oddly life simultaneously on our foreheads – the cross, after all, is the same cross that was imbedded into your forehead by the priest at baptism, marking you as Christ's own forever,

Ash Wednesday is a day of atonement, or regeneration, or beginning again.

T.S. Eliot begins his poem, Ash Wednesday, with the words, Because I do not hope to turn again, Because I do not hope, Because I do not hope to turn ...

And yet, the stark surprise of Ash Wednesday is that there is still hope. Your hope, in Christ, to turn.

In Lent, we express our intent to lead a new life, as the prayer says, by discipline, the discipline to not just give something up, but to do something meaningful that reflects the desire to lead a new life in new relationship with God, and with others.

The yielding, and the hope.