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## Little Cups of Dirt

(Romans 3:21-24 NRSV) 21 But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, 23 since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; 24 they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus....

Writer Rachel Remen tells the following story about a childhood encounter with her grandfather:

Often when he came to visit, my grandfather would bring me a present... Once he brought me a little paper cup. I looked inside expecting something special. It was full of dirt. I was not allowed to play with dirt. Disappointed, I told him this. He smiled at me fondly. Turning, he picked up the little teapot from my doll's tea set and took me to the kitchen where he filled it with water. Back in the nursery, he put the little cup on the windowsill and handed me the teapot. "If you promise to put some water in the cup every day, something may happen," he told me.

At the time I was four years old and my nursery was on the sixth floor of an apartment building in Manhattan. This whole thing made no sense to me at all. I looked at him dubiously. He nodded with encouragement. "Every day..." he told me.

And so I promised. At first curious to see what would happen, I did not mind doing this. But as the days went by and nothing changed it got harder and harder to remember to put water in the cup. After a week I asked my grandfather if it was time to stop yet. Shaking his head no, he said, "Every day..." The second week was even harder and I became resentful of my promise to put water in the cup. When my grandfather came again, I tried to give it back to him but he refused to take it, saying simply, "Every day...." By the third week I began to forget to put water in the cup. Often I would remember only after I had been put to bed and would have to get out of bed and water it in the dark. But I did not miss a single day. And one morning there were two little green leaves

that had not been there the night before.

I was completely astonished. Day by day they got bigger. I could not wait to tell my grandfather, certain that he would be as surprised as I was. But of course he was not. Carefully he explained to me that life is everywhere, hidden in the most ordinary and unlikely places.... “And all it needs is water, Grandpa?” I asked him. Gently he touched me on the top of my head. “No...,” he said. “All it needs is your faithfulness.”<sup>1</sup>

There may be folks who may find themselves uncomfortable with Ash Wednesday and Ash Wednesday worship. For some life-long Protestants in certain traditions, it may still seem new and different. It may feel strange. The ritual of the ashes may seem like something very unfamiliar even though the church has used this ritual since the first century. Nonetheless, for some it has simply not been a part of their faith and history.

But others may have a very different kind of worry about Ash Wednesday. After all, this is the day when we are reminded, using the church’s old, old saying, to “*Always remember that thou art dust and to dust thou shall return.*” Dust. Dirt. Ashes. Ash , in fact, hearkens back to the creation story itself when that first human being is given a name, “Adam,” that literally means “the one from the dirt”? For part of what Ash Wednesday is about is indeed an explicit reminder of mortality and that our lives our transient, the explicit reminder that we live for but a time and are bound to return to that dirt from which we were made. And yet, that is exactly where some of us may want to say: ***I don’t need any reminder of mortality. I don’t need any reminder of life’s***

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<sup>1</sup>Rachel Remen, [My Grandfather’s Blessings](#)

**transience.** For, after all, we have had more than half a dozen deaths in this congregation in the last few months. Some have had friends meet cruel and hard-to-understand and untimely deaths. Others wait and worry and wonder in the midst of medical issues. And **all** of us wake up in the morning and know that there is now one fewer day in our lives – however many those days may end up being – than there was yesterday. Before her death, my mother used to say *“I get up in the morning and I look in the mirror and I say to myself ‘Who **IS** that old lady and when did that happen?’”* She’s right, for while transience and mortality may indeed sometimes surprise us in the midst of our denials, nonetheless mortality indeed comes to us all – and we may be silently saying “I don’t need any **extra** reminders of that fact, thank you very much!”

But in its wisdom the Church has known for 2000 years that despite that feeling, **we DO** in fact need to come to worship before God and Christ and **explicitly acknowledge** our mortality, our transience, our “ashiness.” Because **not** doing so can make life harder to deal with and, moreover, avoiding that acknowledgment just rings false. For there is just no getting around the fact that you and I do live lives that are very much – as Adam’s oh-so-right name, “of the dirt,” reminds us – part of the earth, part of the sometimes dustiness and “ashiness” of life. Sometimes we even feel that it is **our** lives that are inside of that little cup of dirt. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. Muck and mud.

But it is a theological mistake to think that Ash Wednesday is **only** about the “ashiness,” the mortality, the “dust and dirt” of life. Because the meaning of Ash Wednesday is this: It is not **just** that life is sometimes hard and that mortality hurts, it is

that God is at work ever and always *even in the midst of mortality*. Like Rachel's grandfather's seeds that were hidden away in that little cup of dirt working patiently and persistently, so too is God always at work in the middle of the sometimes muck and mire, the dust and the dirt, working patiently and persistently and lovingly and passionately that life would continue to burst forth even when it was unexpected. The ashes that will mark our foreheads or our hands are in the shape of a cross, and that is not just a reminder of Jesus' own earthly mortality but it is a reminder that God worked with and through even the evil of the cross to seek to bring about good and new life.

My one disagreement with Ms. Remen's powerful and evocative story of the gift from her grandfather lies in the final line: "***All it takes is your faithfulness.***" I don't think that has it quite right. Because the good news of the gospel is that what it takes is **God's** faithfulness, not *just our* often imperfect and always transitory and mortal strivings and efforts. God IS at work in the dust and the dirt. God IS at work in both the highest moments of life and the lowest. Theologian Joseph Sittler once said that if were doing his ministry over again, he would preach more often and more honestly about the nature of both earthly life and the life everlasting. And he is right: In the midst of acknowledging, indeed, that life is mortal and transient, sometimes full of muck and "ashiness," the mark of the ashes also reminds us that God is always and ever faithful to those whom he has made from the dirt and into whom He has breathed his very own Spirit, and God promises that faithfulness continues in this life and eternally for evermore. For that good news on Ash Wednesday and every day, thanks be to God. Amen.