

DIVINE DUST
PSALM 8

JUNE 1, 1986

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The German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, went for a walk through the streets of Berlin one night, burdened and vexed with problems he found insurmountable. All was mystery to him, the outlook was dark, and the world was a hopeless riddle. He stumbled through a park in much the same way he was stumbling through life. A policeman found him sprawled on a bench and, assuming Schopenhauer to be an undesirable, barked at him, "Who are you and what are you doing here?" To which Schopenhauer replied, "I wish to God I knew." We humans are all plagued by these questions--who are you and what are you doing here?

We are receiving a fine group of young people into the church this morning. They have completed their confirmation training and are ready to take the step to publicly identify themselves with the church, the step which also signifies that they are leaving childhood and entering those tumultuous years we call the teens. They are beginning to leave the nest where they have experienced dependence upon their parents. Now they are testing the wind of independence and asking those critical questions--who am I and what am I doing here?

This morning let's look at the first question--who are you? I invite the rest of us to join the class in the search for the answer, for most of us have already found that the answer is elusive. Most of the time we have an answer that satisfies us; but, I find that whenever I think I have reached a place in my life where the answer seems clear, something happens that shakes me to my foundation and I look again for an answer.

The psalmist in our lesson today, Psalm 8, gazed in wonder at God's creation. He was overcome by the majesty and vastness of the universe. He wrote in verse 3, "When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established," and then he looked at himself and the people around him, and asked in awe, "What is man, that you think of him; mere man, that you care for him?" How, O God, can you care about people when they seem so insignificant in the vastness of the universe?

There has been no end of answers to the question--who are you? Glendon Harris writes:

Indeed, it is likely that no other question has been more often pondered, debated, wondered at, worried over, and rhapsodized about. Every poet, philosopher, psychologist and preacher--from Plato, to Paul, to Shakespeare, to Freud, to John Paul Sartre--has tried in his own terms to answer the question. Every field of study: anthropology, biology, physics, economics, history, psychology, religion--has searched for the answer.

Here are a few of the answers: Sir Thomas Browne, "Man is a noble animal." Francis Church, "a mere insect." Seneca, "a reasoning animal." Thomas Percy, "but a beast." Rudyard Kipling, "small potatoes." Plato, "a prisoner." Tennyson, "master of his fate." Montaigne, "certainly stark mad." Do any of those answers sound right to you? Do any of them fit you?

This morning I would like to suggest to you the beginning of an answer, based on the Bible, simply stated: divine dust. You are essentially divine dust. The second story of creation in Genesis, chapter two, tells us that the Lord God formed Adam of dust from the ground. God told Adam that life will not be easy; hard work will be required, and then you will return to the ground. "You are dust," says the Lord God, "and to dust you shall return."

You may not find yourself thrilled to be told that you are dust! I imagine most of us would prefer to think of ourselves as being more than dust, but the book of Genesis tells us that from the ground, from dust, God made the plant life, animal life, and humans. Because you are dust, you are made of the very same substance from which all of life is made. You are not only related to plants and animals; but you are interrelated, interconnected, and interdependent. The theory of evolution underscores the biblical teaching by demonstrating that humans evolved on this earth by the very same process that all of life evolved. We are no better; we are not superior. We are interdependent. We cannot live, we cannot sustain ourselves without the earth's air, water, plants and animals. We have no right to destroy, exploit, pollute, or contaminate God's creation.

Likewise, we cannot live without other people. We are interrelated, interconnected, and interdependent. Therefore, because you are dust, you have no right to be proud, arrogant or superior. Paul said it well in his letter to the Romans, 12:3, "I bid every one among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think," and in Philippians 2:3, "Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves." When you think you deserve the biggest piece of pie; when you think you have the right to the best parking place or the best school; when you think because you are white, American, and rich, the rest of the world owes you its resources and homage; when you think you are extra special and deserve extra special treatment; then, remember, "You are dust and to dust you shall return."

But, you are divine dust! Because the psalmist knew we are but dust, he was astonished by the love and care God has for humans. Who are we, he asked, that God should care about us? He exclaims that God has crowned us with glory and honor and has given us dominion over God's creation. We humans have been given dominion "over all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea." (Psalm 8:7-8) To the detriment of us all, the word "dominion" has been defined in its most literalistic sense as "ruling." And, humankind has seen itself as an autocrat, despot and dictator. We have assumed that nature is our slave with whom we can do anything we please.

The biblical meaning of "dominion" is "caretaker." God gave humans the responsibility of taking care of his creation. We are the stewards, the managers, the caretakers; not greedy, selfish, autocratic rulers.

The psalmist also wrote that God made humans a little less than himself, slightly inferior to God. God has given humans, because we are the caretakers, a position just slightly lower than the angels and God himself. This position allows us to enter into a special relationship with God. The relationship we have with God is one of covenant. God has entered into

covenant--a special pact, agreement and relationship--with you.

Who are you? You are dust that has the capacity to commune with God. Some religions teach that we are all part of God, that we are God, or, at least, that God is in us. The Bible does not go that far. I do not see myself as God, or even a part of God. But, I do see myself as having the capacity and the privilege of entering into relationship, into covenant, with God. Richard Hillary, one of the famous English Spitfire pilots of World War II was shot down and parachuted into the English Channel. While floating, helpless from burns, inviting death to relieve him of his pain, Hillary reflected upon his situation. He thought about the absurdity and the stupidity of war that got him where he was. He wondered about his life and his purpose. He tried to make sense out of what had happened and what was happening to him. He felt lonely and isolated, isolated from people and isolated from God. As he began to connect with God (which is his phrase), he experienced a sense of peace which sustained him and kept him lucid until he was miraculously rescued.

When you connect with God, you begin to discover who you are, you begin to discover the wonder that is you. Pablo Casals said it well:

Do you know what you are? You are a marvel. You are unique. In all the world there is no other person exactly like you. In the millions of years that have passed there has never been one like you...You may become a Shakespeare, a Michelangelo, a Beethoven. You have the capacity for anything. Yes, you are a marvel.

As divine dust, you may commune with God, pray to God, experience the presence of God which we call the Holy Spirit, walk with God, and worship God. Perhaps the birds worship God when they lift their heads and sing. Perhaps the lion is worshipping when he pulls back his head and roars out over the jungle. But, certainly, humans have the capacity to worship God. A friend recently told me of an experience he had in Yosemite Park. In the midst of Yosemite's grandeur--the majestic mountains, the rushing waterfalls, the brilliant moonlight--he praised God and realized how central worship is to life. He said that he realized we are placed on this earth to love one another and to praise God. What a privilege you and I have to gather here in this house weekly to praise God. It is our duty, responsibility and great privilege. What a privilege to learn how to worship on this earth for heaven is where we will constantly worship. With every breath you breathe, you can praise God, thanking God for the wonder of the day, the beauty of the earth, the joy of love. Life is good and as divine dust, you have the capacity to pray, sing and praise.

Who are you? The beginning of an answer is the biblical answer: you are dust, interrelated, interconnected, interdependent with all forms of life; but you are also divine dust. You are a unique person, a marvel, capable of connecting with God.

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