

SMT Article, March 11, 2019

By Rev. Jan Cook

“Remember you are dust; and unto dust you shall return.”

From the liturgy of Ash Wednesday

I visited New York City once. I was at a conference center at Stoney Point and one of the people attending the conference had to go back to work in the city for a day and asked if there was anyone who wanted a ride in. I was the only one to jump at the chance and later that morning was dropped off in lower Manhattan with a whole day to see as many sights as I could walk to. There was so much to see! At the top of my list was the Winter Gardens that were so lavishly praised in the brochure. But imagine my surprise when it turned out to be palm trees growing indoors! I saw the Twin Towers that day and ate pastrami on rye. As I walked along the streets after a long day I noticed a growing feeling of being closed in. On every side of me were buildings so tall they blocked the sky. Greenery was confined to small bits and pieces in a pot or in a public space. I felt cut-off from something that was vital to my well-being.

On Ash Wednesday we have a tradition of placing ashes on the foreheads of those who participate and to remind ourselves of this reality, “Remember you are dust; and to dust you will return.” This is not meant to be a threat or contempt of human inferiority but rather a reminder that we are one with all of creation and born from the same Creator’s hands. It reminds us that in the natural course of all living things there is a beginning, middle and an end. This day is a dusty day. We are to remember the truth that we came from the earth and will return to the earth. We are the creatures not the Creator.

In many ways Ash Wednesday is a day to celebrate and embrace beginnings. In the Christian tradition we acknowledge this as a time to reflect on the life of Jesus as he prepared for his journey of love and forgiveness. We also recognize that, as followers of Christ, we must reflect on our own preparation to make that journey with him, all the way to the end. Connecting deeply is one of the most critical needs we have and we cannot make any journey without it.

That day in the city I became very aware that in being cut off from the earth, sky, trees and open spaces I felt cut off from a part of me! I felt disconnected. I recognize that some of this may have been the reaction of a native Southern Californian to that specific part of New York City, but it gave me pause. We are called to be careful, tender and judicious with all our fellow creatures and with all of creation. I know I experience joy and peace when I feel the sand between my toes, the wind lifting my hair and the sun warming my face. In those moments the divine thread that binds all living things together is most visible.

Hopefully, during this season of reflection and preparation, you will take a moment to be in communion with all those you love, past, present and future that are also formed from the dust of the earth. I encourage you to take a grateful moment to indulge your senses with what this good earth offers. As Macrina Wiederkehr says in her book, *Behold Your life*, “This is my family, the entire human race, the animals, the birds, the trees, the plants and the flowers. We are relatives – intimately connected. This is holy ground!”