

February 18, 2026 – Ephesians 3:14-21 & Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Tonight we began Lent in the same way we always do: with ashes traced in the shape of a cross. Ash is an incredibly lightweight substance. Breath on it wrong and it blows away. Yet it also sticks to everything. To my hands. To your foreheads. It clings to us as closely as the sin that condemns us.

And yet, though it's so very light, the ashes we wear tonight speak to a very heavy truth: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." There's no deception in that statement. No glossing over uncomfortable truths. Ash Wednesday is unflinchingly honest. It confronts us with our mortality and our sin. We don't gather this evening pretending to be strong. We come confessing that we are frail, that we are dust, and that because of sin we are dying.

Yet in contrast to this stark reality, in our Epistle lesson the apostle Paul offers a prayer filled not with despair, but with confidence. He bows his knees before the Father and asks that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith. That we may be rooted and grounded in love. That we may have strength to comprehend the vastness of Christ's love. That we may be filled with all the fullness of God. That Christ would continue to do His work for us.

That's our Lenten theme this year. For Us. Those two words summarize everything we'll contemplate in the weeks ahead. And as small as they are, they appear over and over again. They're in scripture, "*but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*" They're in the great hymn we just sang, "For us He gave His dying breath." They're in the Nicene Creed we just confessed together, "Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven."

That Christ died "for us" is a central Christian doctrine and something we're going to explore using the hymn "O Love, How Deep" for the next few weeks. But first, we have to deal with this first verse of the hymn. Which doesn't actually include the phrase "for us," but which does address the hard truth of Ash Wednesday.

"*That God, the Son of God, should take our mortal form for mortals' sake.*" For mortals' sake. For us. Lent is not chiefly about what we offer to God, but about what God in Christ has done and continues to do for us.

These ashes remind us what we are. The prophet Joel calls us to return to the Lord with all our heart, because we have wandered. He urges us to rend our hearts, because they are black with sin. We like to manage appearances. As Jesus warns in Matthew 6, we're tempted to practice righteousness in order to be seen. We prefer to look composed, disciplined, spiritually competent.

But these ashes we're wearing aren't flattering. They declare that our bodies are fragile, that our righteousness is insufficient, and that death isn't hypothetical. The Law does its work tonight. It humbles us. It silences our pride. It levels the playing field. We are all dust and to dust we will return.

And yet, as I said, in our Epistle, Paul kneels not in terror, but in trust. He bows before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named. The ashes tell us what we are, but Paul's prayer tells us whose we are. He asks that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith. Not merely visit, not merely advise, but dwell. The eternal Son of God takes up residence in mortal hearts. The One before whom angels bow chooses to inhabit dust. Why? For us.

Paul prays that we would be rooted and grounded in love. Rooted, like a tree drawing life from deep waters. Grounded, like a building resting securely on a foundation that will not shift.

Everything built on human strength eventually collapses. Health fails. Plans unravel. Reputations fade. But the steadfast love of the Lord, the love Joel proclaims as gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, does not fail. That love has flesh and blood. It has a name: Jesus Christ. And it is for us.

And so Paul, expressing with the language of measurements something that is immeasurable, speaks of the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love. Its breadth is wide enough to encompass the world. Its length stretches from eternity past to eternity future. Its height rises to the throne of God. Its depth descends into death itself.

On Ash Wednesday we look into that depth, reminded that we are dust and destined for the grave. But the depth of Christ's love goes deeper still. He descends into our mortality, enters our suffering, bears our sin, and tastes our death. Not accidentally, not tragically, but intentionally. For us.

The cross traced in ashes upon your forehead matters. Lent doesn't end in dust. It leads us to the cross and through it to the empty tomb. Typically, when we bury someone in a grave, we do so with the words, "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust." Because if you were to open that grave again, that's what you'd find. Decaying flesh. Earth returning to earth. Ashes returning to ashes. Dust returning to dust. But not at Christ's tomb.

So when Paul says that the love of Christ surpasses knowledge, he means that it exceeds every attempt to measure it. It can be studied for a lifetime and never exhausted, preached for decades and never fully explored. How can there be any limit to a love that enters into death itself? How can there be a measurement to a love that conquers death itself?

But with His victory over death in mind, Jesus also gives us a warning. In our Gospel lesson, Jesus warns us about turning fasting and discipline into a performance. Into a competition. Because the Father who sees in secret rewards us not with applause, but with Himself. *"Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."*

Ash Wednesday makes that question all the more relevant: Where is your treasure? If it's in your body and the things of this world, then those ashes on your forehead are a terrifying reminder of how fleeting this life is. How this world is a place where, as Christ said, moth and rust destroy, and even your body isn't exempt from decay. But if your treasure is Christ, who dwells in your heart through faith, then even ashes become a sign of hope. The One who entered the dust did so for us.

And continues to do so for us. That's the final request of Paul's prayer in our Epistle: that we may be filled with all the fullness of God. Creatures of dust filled with divine fullness.

A paradox that would seem impossible except that God has already done the impossible. For the fullness of God emptied Himself for us. The One who was rich became poor. The immortal embraced mortality. He who knew no sin was made sin. Every step of His earthly life, every humiliation, every act of obedience, every drop of blood was deliberate. Everything was for us.

So tonight you came forward, you received ashes, and you heard the words, "Remember that you are dust." But you also heard absolution. You heard that your sins are forgiven. You heard that Christ dwells in your heart through faith.

And in just a few minutes you will hear once again, "Take, eat; this is My body, which is given for you... Drink of it all of you; this cup is the new testament in My blood, which is shed for you." The ashes aren't the final word. The final word is the love of God for us.

You are dust, yes. But you are dust claimed by Christ, dust marked with the cross, dust destined not merely for a grave but for resurrection. The Father has named you His own. The Son has taken your mortal form for mortals' sake. The Spirit strengthens you to grasp a love that surpasses knowledge.

Therefore we begin Lent not in despair, but in wonder. O Love, how deep and broad and high, that God, the Son of God, should take our mortal form... for us. Amen.