Matthew 6: 1-6,16-21
Ash Wednesday
March 5, 2025
The Rev. Katherine Bush

I knew a little boy once who didn't want to get ashes. He didn't want to get ashes because he thought they would be hot and would burn him. Everything he knew about safety and fire told him to steer clear. It must have been bewildering to him to have his parents and all these other trusted adults telling him to approach this obvious danger. So, in honor of that little boy: these ashes will not burn you.

Beyond that assurance, though, I don't know exactly what these ashes will do to you. For as many people as are here, there will be that many responses to the sensation of walking forward and feeling someone stain your forehead. They are meant to remind you of something. "Remember" is the instruction that comes with the smudge. Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. Remember that you are mortal, you're a short timer. Remember that you are made of earth and breath. Remember that you are flawed, broken, a sinner.

This news may startle you or frustrate you. Though it will not burn, it might sting a little - at least metaphorically - to have this gritty, dark reminder placed on your forehead and to hear that you (and I) are dust. But we need to remember, to be reminded because it's so easy to forget. It's easy to forget in a death-denying world. In world of endless distractions, we can skip along and skip the truth. We have so many options for numbing our days and avoiding that gritty darkness. A lot of us spend a lot of time trying not to remember, pushing down the awareness that we are short-timers, pushing away the idea that we're made imperfectly.

In Claire Keegan's beautiful novella Foster, the young protagonist receives some difficult news and knows that things are about to change. "I stand there and stare at the fire, trying not to cry. It is a long time since I have done this and, in doing it, remember that it is the worst thing you can possibly do." Trying not to cry, she knows, is the worst thing you can do when you really need to cry. You've probably noticed this too, but trying not to remember, trying not to feel something only makes it worse. Just like trying not to cry doesn't make the pain or sorrow go away, instead it seems to amplify those feelings.

So, I do have an offering for you about these ashes. They will not burn you, far from it. A surprising possibility is that the gritty, dark touch of these ashes may feel like a needed relief. They will help you remember that you are dust. Like finally crying after trying not to for so long, we remember the avoided truth that we are broken and mortal and the truth shudders us and shakes something lose so that we can breathe again. We are sinful and so very imperfectly human. This news will not burn you; it's possible that it may even be a healing balm. Admitting that we are all faltering and flawed is ultimately a source of tremendous relief and release. Because we can stop pretending otherwise. We can drop the pretense of perfection, putting an end to our posing and posturing. We can even, as someone suggested, stop practicing our piety before others in order to be seen by them, we can stop trumpeting our giving, and we can stop parading our prayers and making sure everyone knows how hard we are trying. We weren't fooling anyone anyway, except maybe ourselves.

It's a relief to drop the facade and to tell the truth. We are dust. We have a limited amount of time here, and we are prone to bungle things up while we are. We will get hurt and we will cause hurt. This is the reality of things. And this doesn't have to burn us. It can actually be a consolation, a surprising sense of relief to name the truth of our bounded little lives. Trying not to cry, trying to forget the truth of our lives is one of the worst things we can possibly do.

Facing reality may seem daunting, even dangerous to approach, but it's what we are here to do today and it won't destroy us. On the contrary. From this place of honesty, and only from here, it's possible to begin to repent and to make amends. When we stop pretending, and only then, we can better use the precious resource of our scarce days. Once we remember that we are dust, it's possible to meet God and to receive the forgiveness of God who created us from dust, loves us too much to burn us, and offers us instead the gift of mercy and relief.