“Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

Our ability to remember is a powerful force within us.

Memory holds our habits and fears, our joy and anger, our knowledge and experience. Memory is what integrates the experiences of a lifetime and feeds the inner resources from which we draw when seeking healing and wholeness. Memories can be complicated, laden with layers of hurt and grief, satisfaction and joy, connection and hope.

Of course, we do not actually remember BEING dust. We remember the qualities of dust, and the transformations that produce it.

Being told to “remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return” touches our core. It is rare, raw, and compelling to be ordered to remember something so primal: to be reminded of our mortality with such direct, simple, and honest words —words with no pretense; words with power to cleanse our souls. Like a water filter one carries on a backpacking trip, these words strain the impurities out of an essential commodity: mindfulness of life’s brevity.

Our Gospel reading for Ash Wednesday speaks to our private and individual relationship with God. It affirms that God knows our inmost thoughts, including the impurities we seek to strain from our lives and relationships. It affirms that God accompanies us on our Lenten journey, and on every journey. A God who “knows in secret” assures us we are known and loved beyond measure, even in the darkest of places. The promise that God knows us in secret frees us to do the work of Lent.

Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows wrote in the Ash Wednesday entry of Living Well in Lent:
Lent is our time to be intentional about taking stock of the most broken parts of our lives and our world as we seek forgiveness for our sins of omission and commission.

Each of our Lenten journeys has a separate itinerary. Yet, because we worship in community, our separate journeys are not solitary. In profound ways, we journey through Lent together with common faith, in a common timeframe, at a common table.

Historically, the season of Lent has been a time that held mixed but related purposes. It was a time to prepare for Holy Week and Easter with penitence, prayer, and fasting. It was a time of preparation for persons seeking Baptism—a practice that continues today, and one that we will joyfully share with the newly baptized of Trinity Cathedral, come Easter.

In times past, Lent also was a time set aside for reconciliation between the church and “notorious sinners”—persons separated from the church body who were seeking restored fellowship through penitence and forgiveness.

In turn, the reconciliation of notorious sinners set in motion an opportunity for the entire congregation to practice Christ’s message of pardon and absolution—a time for all members consider their role in forgiving and embracing those who had been cast out.

But times have changed. The church no longer requires sinners to wear sackcloth and ashes as a form of public penance. Nor does it engage in collective ritual for reconciliation. Separation and restoration of church members, if done, is more private. As a church, we no longer exercise the muscle of collective forgiveness with much regularity.

As individuals, as communities, and as inhabitants of Planet Earth, we have great need of healing, especially in settings where peer pressure can cloud our best intentions and distort information.

Opportunities to publicly experience and model forgiveness—both individually and corporately—are rare. And they are needed. Forgiveness is not easy.
Sometimes a story comes along that pushes our imagination to new horizons and opens our hearts to new possibilities.

Helen Davis, in her essay “Faithful Grief,” shared a story of compassionate reconciliation told by Russian poet Yevtushenko. As a young child in 1944, Yevtushenko watched 20,000 German prisoners of war march through the streets of Moscow.

The crowd of onlookers was mostly women, all of them mourners. Probably there was no one in the crowd who had not lost a loved one. Davis wrote:

“There was a low roar of hatred as the German generals marched past, chins thrust forward in disdain for their captors; police barely restrained the women from attacking them. But then came the long line of ordinary soldiers, and Yevtushenko describes the change that took place in the crowd:

They saw German soldiers, thin, unshaven, wearing dirty, blood stained bandages, hobbling on crutches or leaning on the shoulders of their comrades; the soldiers walked with their heads down. The street became dead silent—the only sound was the shuffling of boots and the thumping of crutches. Then I saw an elderly woman in broken-down boots push herself forward and touch a policeman’s shoulder, saying, “Let me through.” There must have been something about her that made him step aside. She went up to the column, took from inside her coat something wrapped in a colored handkerchief, and unfolded it. It was a crust of black bread. She pushed it awkwardly into the pocket of a soldier so exhausted that he was tottering on his feet. And now from every side women were running toward the soldiers, pushing into their hands bread, cigarettes, whatever they had. The soldiers were no longer enemies. They were people.”

The memories that hold our pain are powerful, but God’s ability to move our hearts is even more so, if we’re willing to risk it.

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Lent is a time when we are invited to “risk it”—to retreat from stale patterns and open to God’s call in fresh ways—to do something differently, whether by adding, subtracting or transforming some form of practice.

As we are called to our own repentance, our own turning around, let us pray also to lovingly witness and receive the repentance of others.

It is possible to forgive those who have harmed us, even without their repentance. It is possible for those who have harmed us to truly repent, even without our forgiveness. Our Lenten liturgy calls us be bearers of both repentance and forgiveness.

The memory that connects us to all that we love, or suffer, or grieve, also connects us to life’s fragility and mortality, especially in knowing that we are dust and to dust we shall return.

In this holy season of Lent, may we offer to God all that we are and all that we pray to be, trusting that God who knows us in secret is alongside and within us for the long haul.

Amen