

ASH WEDNESDAY SERVICE (2004)

Genesis 2:7 / II Corinthians 4:7

By Pastor John Carlini, D.Mn

Think ahead with me about five weeks into the future. We will be celebrating Palm Sunday. On that day, we will celebrate the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. His disciples got a young donkey, threw a blanket on it then Jesus mounted it and rode towards the city. As Jesus rode, people waved palm branches, threw their cloaks on the road, cheered and called out, "Hosanna in the highest! Praise God for the Son of David! Bless the One who comes in the Name of the Lord!" The crowds cheered wildly, along the route. And do you know something ... Never once was the young donkey confused or think the crowd was cheering for him.

Now I've told that story to many of you before, and we laugh. It's funny ... until we apply that to our own lives. Prior to the Enlightenment about 300 years ago, there was not much confusion about our relationship with God. Religious scholars generally believed, preached, and taught that our basic nature and bent are evil. In other words, in our most natural state, we were less than nothing, we were evil and we were in desperate need of God's love, His forgiveness, His mercy, and His righteousness.

The driving forces of The Enlightenment changed that concept by saying that humans are naturally good and that we are the measure of all things, not God. In Philip Yancey's latest book, Rumors of another world, he dedicates a whole chapter to the concept of how modern day culture has lost a sense of the meaning of the word sin. Even in modern day Bible teaching churches, it is not often that we hear sermons on sin. When I remind my colleagues and friends that we are nothing ... they often bristle as if I had spoken some unthinkable thought.

I would like to start off our Purpose Driven Life campaign by reintroducing us to a Biblical Anthropology. How does the Bible describe us?

In Genesis 2:7 the text says, “And LORD God formed a man’s body from the dust of the ground and breathed into it the breath of life and the man became a living person.” Since there is so much debate over evolution these days, let me stand up and defend for a moment some of the evolutionists’ points. First of all, if you carefully examine the creation accounts, the order of the creation of animals matches the appearance of the animals in the evolutionary theories. Secondly, we are made out of the same stuff that the animals are made from, dust of the earth. We are mammals.

Here is where we differ with the evolutionists. We are more than animals we were created to receive the breath of life from God when God breathed the breath of life into us. Now keep this in mind; the word breath is also the word for wind, soul or spirit. Then the text says that the man became a living soul so we became alive in a different way from the animals when the breath of God filled us.

However, that didn’t last long, when Adam and Eve sinned, God took His Spirit out of them. From that time on, we have been born physically alive, but spiritually dead. Our existence has been once again reduced to dust of the earth and that is what we are to remind ourselves of each year on Ash Wednesday. In reality we are simply dust of the earth.

That’s why I think that society and culture are so misguided they have forgotten that we are all simply dust. People have been degraded and devalued by society, culture, and sadly at times the church, because of their gender, their race, their education, their financial status, or their culture. Have you ever looked down on someone? Think about how utterly absurd that is. You’re dust ... looking down on someone else who is dust? Do you find yourself with low self-

esteem because of what society, culture, and others have told you about yourself? Is what you value the opinion of dust?

As we start to search for our purpose in life, let's begin with this premise. I am nothing. I am but dust of the earth. I can neither give purpose to my life nor can I define for myself what my purpose in life is. Without God, life is meaningless and our existence is exactly how the evolutionists have described it ... animal life.

But I don't want to leave the Genesis passage without pointing out the fantastic clue it leaves us as to the meaning of our existence. Do you remember, that even though we were created from the same stuff that animals were, we were different? We were made for something they were not made for we were made to contain the breath of God, the Spirit of God. You and I are designed and fashioned to hold the Spirit of God. Did you ever think of that?

Listen to what the Apostle Paul says in his second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 4 verse 7, "But this precious treasure (referring to Jesus) - this light and power that now shine within us - is held in perishable containers, that is, in our weak bodies. So everyone can see that our glorious power is from God and is not our own."

Let's talk value for a moment. God is the most valuable being in the universe. He is more precious than gold, more valuable than silver, more beautiful than diamonds and we are dust and if you add water, we become mud. In the hands of God, this mud is formed, shaped, and hardened into clay pots. These pots are designed to hold the most precious substance in the universe, God Himself. We are the perishable containers. But we become valuable in the simple fact of our potential to be filled up with God.

I have titled the theme for our 40-day journey to purpose driven lives, "From dust to diamonds." If we are for any reason fooled into thinking that we are anything on our own merit,

or if we think life is about us in any way, then we are dust. If we are not believers and if we have not received Jesus into our lives, then we are dust. If we think we are good, talented, wise or clever in any way, then we are dust. We are dust with a lot of potential, but nonetheless ... dust. However, if we are humble enough to listen to God speak to us over the next 40 days, He can change us from dust to diamonds. Let me give you a very graphic example.

In a small French village, in the year 1848 grapes were being picked, pressed, and fermented into wine. On the other side of town, there was a bottle making shop. The vineyard bought some of the bottles and filled them with their wine. Today, in London, a bottle of this wine is selling for \$15,000. In what way are the bottle and its cork valuable? They are valuable in the way it preserves the taste of the wine. If the bottle has an imperfection or if the cork is not perfectly sealed, the wine will turn to vinegar. Having said that keep in mind, that nobody is paying \$15,000 for the bottle they will pay \$15,000 for the wine inside the bottle therefore an ordinary bottle becomes very important.

We are transformed from ordinary mud to valuable clay pots when Jesus comes to live in our hearts. But here is a nice little twist from the bottle analogy. When the buyer purchases the bottle of wine, opens it and drinks it with her friends, she will know if the bottle has done its work and if this 1848 bottle of Bordeaux Red wine is as good as its reputation. But once the wine is gone, that bottle is no longer valuable.

When we come to God in humility and say we want to give our lives to Him, Jesus comes into our hearts through the indwelling of His Holy Spirit, and we become diamond containers, even though we are still made of clay. But here is the interesting thing we are designed to leak. That's right. We are meant to be cracked pots ... not crackpots ... cracked pots. You see we become valuable in two ways. First, we become temples and God lives in us. Secondly, when

we are cracked, when we are broken, God spills out onto those around us. Everything we have of value belongs to God. Our talents, our abilities, our money, houses, wealth of any kind, all come from God and once we come to that knowledge, we are ready to be valuable, diamond containers, ... with cracks all over so that God is spilling out in all sorts of ways. If we are living for God, no one will confuse us for Jesus.

Back to our original story of Christ's triumphal entry, no one's attention was drawn to the donkey no one asked, "Why is everybody cheering the jackass?" It was clear that Jesus was the center of worship and praise.

As we examine our lives, and prepare for this 40-day journey to a purpose driven life, could we say up to this point that our lives have been self-focused ... or God focused; self-centered, ... or God centered; self-glorifying, ... or God-glorifying; self-serving, ... or God-serving?

Many of us give ourselves away by the questions we ask like, "Can I go to an R-rated movie and not sin? How far can I go sexually without crossing the line? How much can I smoke or drink without sinning? How much can I gamble without sinning? What kind of magazines can I look at without sinning?" If those are questions we find ourselves asking, then we are self-centered. Questions we should be asking should be positive questions, "If God lives in me, what are some of things He'd like me to be doing? Where would He like me to be going? How does He want me to serve, and who does He want to spill onto and fill?" Those questions are God-centered.

Since sexual immorality has been a topic in our recent sermons in Proverbs, I'll use this as an example; if I'm asking questions about what we can do physically as a couple without

sinning, then we have already sinned. We should be asking questions like, “Since we are vessels of God, what kinds of things can we do that will protect and promote our purity?”

Again, let’s let God change us from dust to diamonds. He is the only One who can but we must first be broken and humbled. I want to read you some quotes from people who were very successful but understood they were merely the bottles, and that Christ was the valuable contents.

George Macdonald, the writer that most influenced C.S. Lewis’ writings said, **“The men who are aware of their own essential poverty; not the men who are poor in friends, poor in influence, poor in acquirements, poor in money, but those who are poor in spirit, who feel themselves poor creatures; who know that they need much to make their life worth living, to make their existence a good thing, to make them fit to live; these humble ones are poor whom the Lord calls blessed.”**

Hudson Taylor, the founder of China Inland Missions said, **“I often think that God must have been looking for someone small enough and weak enough for Him to use, that He found me.”**

God can change us from dust to diamonds, but it takes place the same way coal is formed ... under great heat and pressure. We will be transformed through the pressures of brokenness and the fires of humility. Our bodies were created from dust, and to dust they will return. However, we have the hope of receiving resurrection bodies in which we will live in the presence of God for eternity. I invite you to join us in this 40-day journey, from dust ... to diamonds.