

**“It’s Not Just Dirt” Genesis 2:4-7; 3:17-19 and Romans 8:19-21**

I grew up making frequent visits to my grandfather’s garden where he grew corn, beans, squash, and plenty of other vegetables. And my Dad also kept a small garden near our house when I was a child.

But it wasn’t until I went to seminary in Atlanta that I learned the difference between dirt and soil. Stan Saunders, one of our New Testament professors, was giving a lecture. And he happened to mention that dirt and soil are essentially the same stuff.

Dirt is just matter that is out of place.<sup>1</sup> When it is where it should be, it’s soil. But when it is where it shouldn’t be, it’s just dirt.

I only wish that I had known this many years ago. After running around and playing in the dust and mud outside, I can just imagine walking into my mother’s kitchen. “*Look what you’re doing!*” she would say. “*You’re tracking dirt all over my clean floor.*”

And I could have looked at her with a smile only a little boy could smile and tell her, “*But Mom, it’s not just dirt! It’s soil!*”

Well, what I didn’t know then, I do know now. And I’m not about to let this chance go by. All that stuff on the ground out there? It’s *not* just dirt.

Genesis explains to us that it is a gracious gift from God. These first few chapters are full of references to *the earth, the ground, and dust*.

God puts human beings in a garden with all kinds of trees that are beautiful to look at and good for food. And these trees grow out of the *ground*. It is the dust of the earth, the ground itself, that feeds human beings and keeps us alive.

But we are much more deeply connected with the soil. The dust of the earth not only feeds us. The dust of the earth is us.

We share a certain kinship with the soil. According to Genesis, we are formed from the dust of the ground. It is usually an insult to call someone “*a piece of dirt*”. But the truth is that all of us are made up of bunches and bunches of pieces of dirt. We start out as dust and then return to the dust when we die.

---

<sup>1</sup> Later, I discovered that he took this idea from the following book  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Purity\\_and\\_Danger](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Purity_and_Danger)

The Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer even went so far as to say that the earth is the mother of all humankind for we come out of its womb.<sup>2</sup> Just as God is our true Father, the earth is our true mother.

And like any child, we receive what you might call part of our DNA from each parent. Without God, without our Heavenly Father, there could be no life. The earth could not produce life by itself, without God, any more than a mother can conceive a child on her own without a father. So far as we know, that has only happened once.

We are born out of the dust. And so, we are not equal to God. We are completely dependent upon God for life. Without his breath in us, there would be no life.

When we remember that we are dust, we remember how fragile we are. We recognize our weakness. Sometimes, we would like to consider ourselves powerful. We may imagine that we have been put in charge of the earth. We may imagine that we rule over all of creation.

But we are dust. And that takes us down a peg or two. We are a part of creation. We are not its rulers. We did not make the earth. We are made out of the earth.

We are bound up together with all of creation. Human beings and nature share an interconnected relationship. We cannot think of ourselves as being completely separate from the dust of the ground.

Even the Hebrew language testifies to that fact. The word for the earth is *adamah*. And the word for a human being, *adam*, is taken out of that word for the earth.

We even keep a little bit of that connection in English. Our word *human* is related to the old Latin word *humus*, which means *the earth*. And both of them are also related to our word *humility* or *humble*.

Human beings are made from the earth. And when we remember that we are made from earth, we are humbled. We are filled with humility when we remember our close connection with the *humus*, the very ground on which we walk.

So the dust of the ground is not just dirt. It is our mother. It is our kin.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Genesis: Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, Miguel De La Torre,

This week, I was reminded of the character of Pigpen from the *Peanuts* comic strip. Pigpen, you probably remember, was the little boy who was always covered in dirt with a cloud of dust trailing behind him everywhere he went.

And in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, he is given the role of the innkeeper in the Christmas pageant. Charlie Brown is directing the play and wants to rehearse one of the scenes at the inn. But Frieda, who is playing the innkeeper's wife, says that she just can't do it.

*"There's too much dust," she says. "It's taking the curl out of my naturally curly hair."*

And Charlie Brown tries to broaden her perspective just a little bit.

*"Don't think of it as dust," he tells her. "Think of it as maybe the soil of some great past civilization. Maybe the soil of ancient Babylon. It staggers the imagination. He may be carrying soil that was trod upon by Solomon, or even Nebuchadnezzar."*

Yet we can go even farther than good ol' Charlie Brown by claiming that Jesus himself trod upon the soil of the earth. And even more amazing is the fact that Jesus was God himself in the flesh.

And that means that, in Jesus Christ, God himself took on a human body. God himself took on the dust of the earth. God himself not only created it but also became part of it by becoming human. God cared enough for the soil to join himself with the soil as he joined himself to humankind. So then, how can we not have respect for the earth?

The dust of the earth became God's body just as it became our bodies. It's more than just dirt.

Moving from Genesis to Romans, we see that Paul says the creation is groaning. The whole universe is crying out with labor pains. The earth itself is frustrated.

As a child, I read Dr. Seuss' book *The Lorax*. And the Lorax claimed to speak for the trees. But the earth seems to be doing a pretty good job these days speaking for itself.

- Record-breaking droughts in the last decade in the Southern United States, in California, and in Australia<sup>3</sup>
- Severe flooding this year in the Midwest, in Iowa, Missouri, and Nebraska<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012%E2%80%9313\\_North\\_American\\_drought](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012%E2%80%9313_North_American_drought)  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Droughts\\_in\\_California](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Droughts_in_California)  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2000s\\_Australian\\_drought](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2000s_Australian_drought)

- Last year saw the deadliest and most destructive wildfire season ever in California<sup>5</sup>
- And the United Nations reports that every year we lose an area of fertile soil the size of the country of the Ukraine, over 233,000 square miles, due to drought, deforestation, and climate instability<sup>6</sup>

Those are the sounds of the earth yearning for salvation. Those are the cries of the soil longing for salvation. Creation itself is waiting for the children of God to be revealed.

And when we go back to the story told in Genesis, we see that the soil suffers on account of our sin. We are responsible for the suffering of the earth. Our sin affects not only our own selves. It affects the dust. It affects all of creation.

The earth itself is cursed because of what Adam and Eve have done. And perhaps, the earth is cursed by what human beings have not done.

We have been given dominion over creation. And *dominion* is not the same thing as *domination*. We were made to be responsible for the birds in the air, the fish in the sea, and even the dust. We were created to tend the Garden. We were created to take care of everything else that God has made.

And the rest of creation is waiting. The birds and the fish and the soil, they are all waiting for us to live up to that responsibility. The earth is crying out for us to be who we are truly created to be. The earthy is longing for us to be good stewards and caretakers of this beautiful and fruitful gift that God has given to us.

Creation is waiting. Creation is looking forward in hope to the same salvation that we wait for. We will not be saved *from* the earth. We will be saved *along with* the earth.

The dust of the ground looks forward to the day when all of creation will be made new. God has promised us new heavens *and a new earth*. The soil itself will be saved. Creation will be set free from bondage. Creation will be restored to its original goodness.

Just as there will be no more tears, no more pain, no more mourning, and no more death, there will be no more thorns, no more thistles, no more drought, no more wildfires, and no more floods. Just as all human suffering will end, creation will no longer suffer the effects of our sin.

---

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2019\\_Midwestern\\_U.S.\\_floods](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2019_Midwestern_U.S._floods)

<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2018\\_California\\_wildfires](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2018_California_wildfires)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/12767615.2008-the-year-of-global-food-crisis/>

Norman Wirzba teaches theology at the Divinity School at Duke University. But he was raised on a 400 acre farm in Canada. On that farm, they grew wheat, barley, and oats along with potatoes and other vegetables and they tended chickens, pigs, and about 1,500 head of cattle.<sup>7</sup>

That experience has stayed with Professor Wirzba and he now teaches and writes about how our relationship with God is connected to our relationship with creation. And he teaches a class at Duke where each student is required to grow a plant for the semester.

They pick the plant. They get the seeds. They select the soil. They work and tend the plant. And then, they write about this experience.

Wirzba describes what he wants these future pastors and scholars to get from this class.

*“The point,” he says, “is to understand what it’s like to put your life in relationship with another living thing. They come to realize they knew nothing about planting--how deep to plant the seeds, how much watering to do, how much labor is involved. It’s not a cerebral exercise.*

*They get an embodied glimpse of what it means to be dependent on plants that provide us food, and they discover how dependent the plant is on them. They learn what farmers have to ask every day--not ‘What do I want to do today?’ but ‘What does the land need today?’”<sup>8</sup>*

I have no doubt that most of you, being farmers yourselves, understand just what Professor Wirzba is talking about. You understand better than anyone else the deep relationship between human beings and the earth in which we live. You understand how we are dependent upon the soil and the soil depends upon us.

It’s not just dirt. It is the stuff of life. It is a gracious gift from God.

It’s not just dirt. It is our mother.

It’s not just dirt. It became the body of God himself.

It’s not just dirt. It is our responsibility.

---

<sup>7</sup> <http://musings.sewanee.edu/post/story/every-loaf-how-the-church-can-change-the-way-the-world-eatsan-interview-wit>

<sup>8</sup> *Reflections Magazine: Yale Divinity School*, Spring 2019, p. 33.

**It's not just dirt. It is longing for salvation and it too will be saved. It will once again be the Garden.**

**May we remember this each and every day.**

**In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**