God is not fooled by our narcissistic and self-serving nature. Even if we are.

I had to open with those two sentences, because they were a gift to me. That is, they came to me unbidden when I looked over today’s readings for the second or third time. My eyes lit on a line from Isaiah. God is speaking through the prophet: “Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day.”

So: God’s not fooled by us and our actions, even when we are. This is all about what’s in our hearts, and God alone can see that.

I was in a non-church Zoom meeting early this morning. One of the other participants, an Episcopalian by chance, had been to a pre-dawn Ash Wednesday service and had this to say: “You know, there’s something about those words—'Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return’—that I find really comforting. Especially when I’m running from one task to another and feeling that I’m in charge and am responsible for seeing to it that everything gets done properly.”

It effectually stopped me in my tracks and brought home to me a simple, powerful truth. That picture in Genesis describes us, each one of us. God kneels by the river flowing through Eden and molds a human being out of mud, primal earthy elements of dust and water. That’s the common stuff of which we’re made, put together in a hyper-complex, miraculous way. But stuff, all the same. Stuff that will return to its common, non-structured state after we die.

We’re just not as big a deal as we sometimes think we are. And God knows that; God is not fooled. And God love us still.

Though it’s not the theme for today, God knows the opposite as well. To clarify: When we think we’re nothing at all, when everything seems to lose color and taste and meaning, we are still the products of—told that we’re the crown of—God’s loving creation. God has created us and imbued us with God’s own divine spirit.

This last, non-Ash-Wednesday-sounding bit, I must acknowledge, because I’ve just been through one of those periods of gray emptiness and dearth of meaning. I can no better describe my descent into that than I can my recent, sudden emergence from it. I can say only that it feels like a kind of death and rebirth, something entirely beyond my control, my willpower. Something from God, it seems.

It wasn’t my first experience of that sort—not by a long shot—and I’m certain it won’t be my last. Somehow the essence of that experience is reflected in those words, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

God is not fooled when we do anything to impress others or try to elevate ourselves by our actions, whether it’s wearing ashes on our foreheads or, conversely, driving a luxury car or living in an opulent home. There’s nothing wrong with doing any of those things. It’s the inner secret, the secret God alone knows—what is in our heart as we go about doing those things.

To take a slightly different tack: “God loves a cheerful giver.” It’s not about plastering a smile on our faces when we give to some charity—even the Church. It’s about God’s grace within us when our charitable and kind actions flow freely and naturally out of hearts filled with gratitude, pure joy.

To try to corral these disparate thoughts that seem to want to charge off in every direction at once, I will reiterate:

* God is not fooled by our clumsy attempts at false piety,
* We are all commonplace and extraordinary.
* Our lives take us through valleys and hills, desserts and springs, depression and liveliness, dark and light
* We have mixed and variable and mercurial emotions and motives.

And God loves us through all of it, even when—maybe especially when—we are confused about our own thoughts, feelings, and motives. God has compassion for us, because God in Christ knows what it is to walk this human path. God knows us both as creator and fellow creature.

God knows that we are dust—brought into being in this amazing human drama. Brought into being, I might say, by means more complex and miraculous than making mud dolls by the side of the river. God knows that we are stuff of mundane elements and indefinable spirit. God loves us through all of that and beyond. Beyond the dust business.

And we need to remember that we are dust, and to dust we shall return.