



Date: January 10, 2016

Title: "Make Me Care, Part 1: Down and Dirty

Scripture: Mark 4: 3,8, 26; Luke 6:47-49; John 8:1-2, 6-8; Revelation 21:3

Description: It's hard to care about something or someone far away. Our image of God dwelling in heaven far away is being replaced by a God on whom we are grounded. "Grounded", as in "dirt". Is God as near as the ground on which we stand? What's the connection between the soil and our souls? Maybe the far-off Father is retiring and becoming a down-to-earth presence. God present in a way that I can actually touch and feel and smell.

Make me care. You know what it feels like not to care, don't you. You sit in front of the TV, pushing the remote every few seconds, scrolling through 387 channels, unable to find anything that captures you. It isn't evil; it isn't painful; it's just a huge yawn. What a contrast to the times you've been on the edge of your seat, chewing on your knuckles, holding your breath, and later talking about what happened to anybody who'll listen. Let's care again.

Let's care about God again. If not with hold-your-breath intensity, at least deeply and with enough passion to sense the holy nearby.

"Nearby" —that's the key word to caring. It's hard to care about anything that's far-away distant. At my neighborhood Presbyterian church in East Tennessee, I learned how to follow the rules, recite the creeds, how to be an obedient Christian boy. I did not learn how to be close to God, and I need God to be close, because distance cannot sustain passion. Do you remember the couple in high school whose love for each other would last forever? They graduated and left for different colleges. Broke up before the end of the first semester. Distance cannot sustain passion.

The religion of my childhood taught me that God was distant. God was up in heaven; we lived down here on earth; the church operated as a holy elevator. God sent down directions; if we obeyed the directions, we could take the elevator up to heaven.

God's default location was up there, distant, remote. God was in the high places, sitting on a heavenly throne, acting like either a divine puppet master or like a stern disapproving judge. Occasionally God might throw a thunderbolt or a hurricane or an Aids epidemic to punish us and remind us who's in charge. But God was essentially way off up there. This is a vision of God whose time may be up.

Rolling around this planet, and right here among us, is a shifting concept of God. It places God close, nearby. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, after Roosevelt's speech about a "day in infamy," after we went to war, our parents asked, "Why did God allow this to happen?" Or perhaps "What is God trying to teach us?" Do you recognize the distance behind those questions? God is powerful and in control, but far above, far away.

After 9/11, after Katrina, after the Chilean miners were trapped a mile underground, a lot of people asked a different question: "where is God?" The answer was often devastating: "God is so far away it doesn't really matter." But another answer also emerged. "God was in the rubble of the World Trade Centers, sitting on the rooftops in New Orleans, God was down there alongside the Chilean miners." This is a God who is close, nearby, more personal and accessible than ever before.

A God who is "up there" and intervenes from time to time creates real problems. It makes God very small. I actually heard somebody say that they were in the grocery store needing a can of tomato paste. They were late to pick up their kids and couldn't find tomato paste. (Guys, can you identify with this poor person?) Then God opened her eyes and there was the tomato paste right in front of her, and it was on sale. God is soo good! Whaaat? It would have been nice if God had done something about the holocaust, right? After last year's Super Bowl, the Seattle quarterback explained that God made that final play happen. Wait, wait. God manipulates the outcome of a football game, but doesn't do anything about the carnage in Syria or the genocide in Somalia. This image of an up-there, distant God trivializes God.

This new image of God may not provide all the answers, but it is an image of a God who is very, very close. Close can make me care. And this is becoming a dominant way of engaging God.

To begin with, this new image of God takes the Christmas story very seriously. It affirms what the Gospel of John says, that "the word became flesh and dwelt *among us...*"

In the last century, a theologian named Paul Tillich began to describe God as "ground." Tillich was hard to read and harder to understand, and no way were many

of us going to try to preach him. But Tillich is making a resurgence. He described God, not as up there in purity, but down here as the foundation, the “ground of everything.” Like the electricity that powers all those things in your life. Like the ground everything rests on. God, right here in the dirt. Not God, afar off and pure, but God, down and dirty.

I’m not saying God in heaven is wrong. It certainly is in the Bible. Genesis 11:5 – “The LORD *came down* to see what mortals had done.” 2 Kings 2 – “God took Elijah up into heaven by a whirlwind...” That three-tiered picture of God up, earth below, and hell beneath is in the Bible, but it isn’t the only picture in the Bible. And it isn’t literal. And it has some unintended side effects, like making God distant, and giving a lot of control to religious elevator institutions.

Faith is shifting from a God of distance to a God of nearness. This can be a rebirth of faith from the ground up. It might really help me care again.

We have a lot invested in the ground. According to the Bible, we were created from dust. We are animated dirt. God brought us into being by taking the dust of the ground into his hands, holding it so close that it can share in the divine breath. Our birthplace was a garden, and our first task was to take care of the garden.

We got our start in the dirt and our destination is in the dirt. I’m not just talking about “you are dust and to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:19) I mean heaven, which the Bible describes not out there beyond the stars but as a *land*,” flowing with milk and honey.” (Amos 13:17) God held out to our faith-father Abraham a promised *land*. The book of Revelation says that in the end, we don’t go up to heaven, heaven comes down to earth, where “...the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples...(Revelation 21)

I wonder if God is available to us down in the dirt. Is God as near as the ground on which we stand? What’s the connection between the soil and our souls? Maybe the far-off Father is retiring and becoming a down-to-earth presence. God present in a way that I can actually touch and feel and smell.

Let’s be careful about this. I can project all kinds of ideas and distortions into the far-off heavens, but you can’t fool dirt. Nor can you escape it. Dirt anchors us in reality.

Jesus talked about dirt in his stories. A farmer sowed his seeds...and the soil is us. The lesson of the story seems to be that we might not be soil-y enough. Jesus also talked about building our lives on solid ground rather than shifting sand. And when he healed the blind man, he made some mud in the clay and rubbed it onto the man’s eyes. (John 9:6-7) The thing about dirt is it is so very real. Finding God in the dirt allows us to experience faith in new ways, ways that may be more real than we’ve known in a while. And I like to care about things that are real.

Dirt isn’t proud, it’s humble. “Humble” comes from *humus*, “ground” and *humilis*, “lowly.” Dirt isn’t proud or arrogant or overbearing. I can take a very short

walk from dirt to getting all First Corinthians 13 with you. (That's "the greatest of these is love" chapter.)

As a child, I learned that there was a direct connection between dirt and fun. I think this is true for adults as well. To live life full bore, you have to get really, really dirty. Running around in the woods, stomping in a mud puddle, making love, raising children, helping those in need, immersing hands in sun-warmed garden soil—Life's pleasures bring us into intimate contact with dirt of one kind or another. Where lies dirt lies fun and pleasure. I'm sorry, but cleanliness is *not* next to godliness. Those who get dirty with regularity and a lot of enthusiasm are more likely to flourish than those who don't. And more likely to have a flourishing faith.

Looking for God down in the dirt may help us know a God who is fertile, a God who is more devoted to our growth and our own coming alive than a God who worries that we might spill something or scuff our dress shoes. What if the richness of good, fertile earth is one of God's ways of reminding me of my call to grow and be alive. What if the solid ground beneath my feet is one of God's ways of assuring me when things feel shaky and I'm falling apart. "On Christ the solid rock I stand!"

Our relationship with dirt is complicated. We've often described being forgiven of sin as washing away of dirt. What if dirt is more than dirty. What if, according to scriptures, dirt was the very first thing God made and God saw that it was good. Then the land brings forth life, and God calls it good. We were made from dust, and God sees that as very good.

Here's some dirt, enclosed in your bulletin. Take it with you. I mean, take it with you all week. Whenever you see it, echo God and pronounce it good. Might make us take care of the earth more. If it serves to remind you that from dust you came and to dust you shall return, then affirm that truth and pronounce yourself and your life as good. Might make you take care of yourself in healthier ways. Look for opportunities to get dirty by helping others.

Some of you may not be in worship every single Sunday this month. If you miss worship, let your bag of dirt insist that you miss it outside. Don't spend your precious Sabbath morning in front of a screen. Go outside and wave hello to some dirt, some clouds, flowing water. While you're there, say hello to God.

Thank heaven for dirt!