

Calling our children dust

Yesterday I declined to be the one to put ashes on my own kids' foreheads. Today I sent them back into the violent world we all have made.

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At our church, several pastors participate in the imposition of ashes. Three stations, two ministers at each, alternating turns so that six thumbs are smudged by the end.

It's a good thing, too, because I want no part of ashing my own children.

"Someone else will need to put the ash on the Sherouse kids," I say with a chuckle and a tear. As a minister, I am often reminded of my own mortality. But my kids?

They're all parts glitter and no parts ash. And I don't want to be the one to tell them, "Remember you are dust..." The world will tell them that clearly enough.

And then I got the full news of the shooting in Parkland, Florida, while leaving the sanctuary and scrolling with my ashen thumb. "Aren't you from Parkland?" a friend had asked via text earlier in the day, before I knew it was the latest hashtagged locale. I assumed his most recent Tinder date must be with a Florida gal. "Not Parkland. Lakeland," I wrote back, but I was still a Florida guy for most of my life. That means countless friends have personal connections. College friends are mourning for their high school alma mater. A college classmate, friend, and fellow Baptist pastor is grieving the death of his adolescent buddy, known to the rest of us as the heroic football coach who stood in front of students against an AR-15.

I scroll through these points of connection, and it somehow brings this closer. Then again, personal connections aren't needed. At one level I am from Parkland. We all are.

Because this is the world. It's not some scary place far off beyond my reach. It's not some place that imposes something on my children from which I'm otherwise shielding them. It's the place I live; it's within my control. It's a place that I am co-creating. God created a garden, but we have created the world as it is. So this is the world as we have made it—as I have made it.

It's the world I sent my kids into again this morning, complete with all our morning rituals—habits so strong I forget what they mean. First, we roll in to the sound of the Kidz Bop soundtrack. Then comes the frantic update on the time from the backseat ("four minutes until the bell!"). A reluctant "I love you, Della," under the breath of a too-cool big brother. "Daddy, will you hold my bag?" his little sister asks. I don't mind, you see, as long as she keeps holding my hand all the way to her kindergarten classroom. (You better believe I'll carry that bag to first grade, too.) Then these words:

Remember who you are.

Remember who loves you.

Remember to do your best work.

Remember to be a good friend. (That one's from their mother.)

But it occurs to me, as I walk away, that the schoolyard ritual today was incomplete. It ought to have included that refrain that we are repeating to our children each and every day in our mad world: *Dear ones, remember you are dust.*