

ASH WEDNESDAY
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 (Fasting and Prayer)

Matthew's Gospel's strong language against the religious leaders is rooted in a conflict between Matthew's church and the synagogue after the fall of the Jerusalem temple in 70 C.E. Both were positioning themselves as proper heirs and interpreters of Israel's traditions. The religious leaders are characterized as engaging in acts of righteousness but for the wrong motivation -- gaining glory from people instead of serving God. Jesus calls for a higher righteousness -- engaging in these acts in ways that do not draw attention to oneself but draws one closer to God.

However, individual topics of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting are not the primary focus for Matthew. They are simply lenses through which we can examine the principle introduced: when we do acts of righteousness appropriately, in ways that are not self-serving and do not seek admiration from other people, we will be rewarded by God.

The reward we get from other people is in the form of immediate gratification, but God's reward is future, eschatological. This does not assert we are to be righteous *in order to* get a reward from God. The contrast in the examples is not between seeking praise from people and seeking a reward from God. The contrast is between doing righteous acts "so that they may be praised by others" and "so that your alms may be done in secret."

To change strategies simply to get a better reward is still self-serving. Matthew wants the reader to get the point: doing acts of righteousness is "not about us."
We do acts of righteousness or good deeds because they are right. Matthew is concerned with the intent behind contemporary acts of righteousness.

Imagine the religion of Israel as a great dramatic theatre. Moses goes up on the mountain and the clouds close underneath him like curtains. He brings down the commandments, yet the children of Israel are unimpressed. Solomon builds a huge temple. Inside, behind a great curtain, is the Holy of Holies, where the high priest, like Moses before him, communes with the Lord. He returns from this holy communion with the most precious gift, the forgiveness of sins, the healing of the broken covenant.

Jesus takes this theatre for granted. He does not tell his disciples to keep the commandments; he just assumes that they will. He also assumes that they will want to go beyond the commandments. Like any observant Jew, they will want to serve their neighbour by giving alms, worship God by praying and live a disciplined life by fasting. Jesus does not say "if you pray," "if you fast," or "if you give alms" but "when you pray" "when you fast" and "when you give alms."

But there is a danger backstage in this theatre. For when they leave the land of avoiding misdeeds, the land of "you shall not," the land of commandments -- to enter the land of holy living, the land of "you shall," the disciples are in a different kind of theatre. It can easily become the theatre of performance and show, the theatre of appearance and deceit.

In this theatre almsgiving is rewarded by trumpet fanfare, prayer is a public parade, and the discomfort of fasting is a spectacle. The theatre of religion becomes a gaudy, ugly charade.

Jesus redefines the theatre. His is not a theatre of spectacle or display, but a secret theatre. In the high drama of salvation, God is the actor and the disciple – and that includes us – is the spectator. In the drama of holy life, the stage is a locked room, the actor is the disciple and the audience is God. The place of encounter between God and his people is not the temple, that great theatre, the Holy of Holies. The place of encounter is the locked room (where the disciple meets God one on one), the anonymous gift, the undisclosed hunger.

The child of God wants to be noticed, respected, admired. The child, and we are all children, yearns to be the centre of people's attention. And we can have that – if – that is we want. Or we can choose to be the centre of God's attention. We can choose our audience. If we choose the crowd, we have our reward immediately, the admiration of the crowd. If we choose God, we receive something else, something a child loves: we get to share a special secret. The secret of holiness that is between God and the disciple is not the stuff of newspaper revelations or talk-show speculation. It is a bond that time and death will never break.

Behind these two theatres, the theatre of the crowd and the theatre of the locked room, lies a significant irony. Every theatre is a kind of game, a kind of suspended disbelief with an agreed set of rules. The players in the game are called the actors. And the Greek word for actor is actually hypocrite. We are taught that hypocrisy is not an admirable thing. But what is giving alms without anyone knowing – if it is not saying one thing and doing another? What is praying in secret, unless it is pretending to be something you are not?

What we have here is not the choice between acting and integrity, but between two different kinds of acting. It is not about avoiding hypocrisy, but about choosing what kind of hypocrite or actor you want to be. Some kinds of hypocrisy are inevitable, even desirable. This is because the world we live in is open to multiple interpretations.

There is much good in the world, yet there is also real evil. One can say that there is no reward for good, and act accordingly: the cynic is never disappointed. Or one can say that there *is* reward for good, but wholly or largely in another world. This is faith. It calls the disciple to live, at least part of the time, *as if he or she were already in the next world*, a world where all share freely and constantly commune with God -- in short, a life of love. But this requires the disciple to be an actor, a hypocrite, by appearing to live in this world when deep down he or she believes in the next.

The alternative would be to gain what reward this life has to offer, but do so by gesturing toward the next. It is this last option that Matthew condemns, and describes as hypocrisy, though a better description might simply be lack of faith. A person who lacks faith settles for the majority verdict, the good esteem of the crowd, while the disciple who has faith knows there is only one verdict that matters: the judgment of God.

The faithless disciple aims for both heaven and earth and gets neither. But the faithful one receives an unexpected bonus. Secret almsgiving, prayer and fasting have an additional political and eschatological dimension. The disciple who can fast, who can depend on God for sustenance for a whole day or two, will not be easy prey to purveyors of – instant gratification and immediate solutions, or to advertising, which dominates the contemporary world, with its

promise of rapid and empty reward. The disciple who can pray, who can depend on God's judgment rather than the world's valuation, will not be at the mercy of popularity or fashion. And the disciple who can give alms will quietly question a political relation that thinks it must choose between the maternal state and the selfish individual.

Matthew invites the contemporary church to rethink spiritual disciplines. Spirituality these days has become self-serving. It may not be as crass as clearing our throat as we drop our check in the offering plate so everyone notices, but we often do acts of charity, prayer, abstinence, study and worship with a consumerist mentality. What do I get out of it? How will it give me a higher level of satisfaction? Matthew's Jesus says, "It's not all about you. Do it because you should -- do it because that's what Christians do."

Traditional Ash Wednesday liturgies tend to focus on the brevity of life and remind worshippers that they came from dust and will soon enough return back to the earth, dust once more. For our parents in the faith and many today, Lent was and is a morose season in which they gave up something in order to – prepare themselves for eternal life. The salvation promised and hoped for required turning their backs on the joys of embodiment and the beauties of the earth. Faithful Christians trained their eyes on heaven, forsaking time for eternity. Yes, life is serious and risky business, and no one gets out alive. But is salvation about escaping this world of perpetual perishing or seeing everlasting beauty in each passing moment?

Ash Wednesday challenges us with otherworldliness and asceticism. For many, self-denial in Lent has been typically half-hearted and short-lived or simply a way of attracting attention and focussing on self. Maybe we should reconsider the meaning of Ash Wednesday. The brevity and uncertainty of life invites us to; praise, wonder, and beauty, and to seize the moment, for this is the day God has made and we will rejoice in it! All that we love and care for is mortal and transitory, but mortality is the inspiration to celebration and love. Plato once described time as the moving image of eternity. We are constantly dying, but we are also constantly living as we reflect God's vision in the world of the flesh. Today, in this very moment, God is with us, revealed in flesh, blood, and healing touch.

This evening, we are invited to let go of everything that keeps us from rejoicing in the passing beauty of the earth. Yes, we are dust, but we are earthly dust, springing forth from a multi-billion-year holy adventure. After all, dust is good; it is the place of creativeness, of moist dark soil. And perhaps we are simply "star-dust," emerging from God's intergalactic creativity. We are frail, but we are also part of a holy adventure reflecting God's love over billions of years and in billions of galaxies.

How can we not rejoice in the color purple or pause in wonder at a baby's birth? Ash Wednesday causes us to pause, notice, wake up, and discover that "God is in this place" and now we know it! Ash Wednesday invites us to take a "beauty break," open to the awe-filled, precarious world in which we live.

So this evening, let's consider the lilies and the birds of the air. As we share in the marking of the Cross on our foreheads, let these tracings not represent world-denial or bodily-mortification. Let these tracings be of transformation, of awakening to beauty and love, of seizing the moment.

In our liturgy, it has been common to say “you are dust and to dust you shall return” as ashes are imposed. Our liturgy also provides with the option of saying, "repent and believe the gospel," which we will use this evening.

Perhaps we, too, can "repent," turn around, live more in the moment, appreciating God's grandeur, and believing the good news, the embodied, yet ever-lasting, gospel of beauty, wonder, and grace, the good news of walking with beauty all around us. And remember – it's not all about you. It's about God and living and making God's kingdom here and now in the wonderful creation God has given us to love, care for, share, and enjoy. Amen.