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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Ash Wednesday
March 2, 2022

Lectionary Year C: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

It seems kind of self-contradictory, doesn't it? Jesus tells the disciples, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them" (Matthew 6:1a), and then we do something on Ash Wednesday that's really visible. We have ashes "imposed" upon us -- indeed, a big, black cross on our foreheads for everyone to see. How dare we so directly violate one of our Lord's teachings?!?

In fact, Jesus takes more than a few jabs at the season of Lent, so it seems. What else do we hear in our text for this evening? Something about almsgiving, prayer, and fasting? Aren't those the things we're supposed to be doing during the season of Lent? Well, actually, nothing that we're doing tonight -- or throughout the entire Lenten season -- is a direct violation of Jesus' teaching. It's not the things themselves that are wrong; rather, it's the spirit in which we do them that can be troublesome.

The first example is almsgiving. In Jesus' time, alms -- or money for the poor -- were an important part of one's religious life. In fact, care for the poor was simply one of the social responsibilities of the ancient Jewish people. You left a portion of your field unharvested so the poor would have something to eat, and you gave money to the poor so they could purchase basic necessities. When Jesus refers to the "giving of alms," therefore, he's referring to a practice that is both accepted and acceptable -- in

fact, care for the poor is something that Jesus himself expects. It's just that he doesn't want us to make a big show out of almsgiving, and, along with that, to expect recognition for doing so!

The second example is prayer. This is, obviously, something that's much more familiar to us. We pray every time we come to church and, hopefully, we pray at other times, as well...and not just when we want God to give us something! About prayer, Jesus says, "Do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others" (Matthew 6:5). But, by all means, pray! Again, though, don't make a big show out of it.

The third example is fasting. This is familiar to us, perhaps, by means of the discipline of "giving up something for Lent." Or, maybe, some of you have practiced a "literal" fast, which would mean not eating for a period of time. Whichever way you do it, though, it's not for show -- as Jesus says, "Whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting" (Matthew 6:16a).

Now, these are, as I mentioned earlier, three "classical" Lenten disciplines. And, as you may gather, this is why tonight's text from Matthew, chapter 6 appears on Ash Wednesday. It's an invitation of sorts into the spiritual practices of the season of Lent. We give alms to those less fortunate than we are as a means of appreciating the blessings we do have. We pray in order to renew our minds and spirits. And we fast (or give up something) so that we

may remind ourselves of the sacrifice our Lord made for us. All of these things are to prepare us for the feast that we will celebrate at Easter...but, as with any feast, it cannot be fully appreciated without a little "famine" beforehand. That's one way you might think of these forty days...

But then what about keeping everything a secret? Speaking as someone who's eminently qualified on this matter, this smacks of a kind of Scandanavian, upper-Midwestern forced modesty in which people go to great lengths to not appear "showy." I, for example, know of a case where the buyer of a new car went immediately to the local motor vehicle branch office to get license plates so that it wouldn't be obvious that the car was new! Is Jesus espousing a "Lake Wobegon doctrine" where no one is supposed to do anything outstanding or anything that looks too highfalutin'? In other words, you're not supposed to look "too prosperous" or you're not supposed to "draw too much attention to yourself." Instead, according to this doctrine, you should be satisfied with being above average -- doing your thing (and doing it well) -- but not tooting your horn about it!

Well, it might seem like a "Lake Wobegon doctrine," but Jesus would've had something to tell the people of Lake Wobegon, too! Like, for example, "You hypocrites -- you go so far out of your way to appear modest that you're drawing attention to yourselves!" Any time that we're tempted to pat ourselves on the back and say, "Jesus would have no problem with me in that department," we set ourselves up to be judged by him!

And that's the key, I think. Jesus is actually rallying against doing things in a self-congratulatory and forced manner. It's not the things themselves that he finds objectionable; rather, it's the spirit in which they're done. And, you know, there are plenty of people who do a lot of good for the poor, but there are fewer who do so without recognition or expectation of recognition. And there are plenty of people who pray and pray often, but there are fewer who do so sincerely and in the privacy of their own rooms. And there are plenty of people who fast, but there are fewer who do so in a way that doesn't draw attention to themselves. Jesus knows which one's which. He can tell the difference. And, in this text, he gives us ample clues as to which way we're supposed to give alms, pray, and fast.

But the greatest discipline of Lent is, perhaps, remembering that we are neither immortal nor masters of our destiny. That's where the ashes come in. We can discipline ourselves to do all sorts of almsgiving, praying, and fasting, but with no perspective as to whom we belong to, it will be to no avail. And so we have a cross of ashes on our foreheads tonight...to remind us of the One who died for us and of the death into which we will one day fall. Certainly, we live in a society that does everything it can to avoid death or even the topic of death, but, as Christians, we see it all quite differently. Sure, we are neither immortal nor masters of our destiny, but that's a good thing! We can die and then rise to new life and we can let go and let God be our Master. And if you're looking for a less self-congratulatory and forced way to go, that wouldn't be a bad place to start.

Our ashes this evening are, indeed, not the display for others to which Jesus objects; no, they are more the mirror on ourselves that Jesus has tried so persistently to present to us. He found plenty of people who did all sorts of odd, obvious, and disfiguring things in the name of their religion, but few people who did anything with an authenticity that says, "I'm doing this simply because it's good and it's the right thing to do." One is the way of hypocrisy -- or "like the hypocrites," as Jesus would say -- and the other is the way of ashes. One is the display for others, and the other is the mirror on ourselves. One is the way of death through living, and the other is the way of living through death.

And I think you know which one's which.

Amen.