

St. Paul's, Concord
Ash Wednesday 2018
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
The Rev. Drew Courtright, Curate

Do not do as the hypocrites do, but give, pray, and fast in secret and your heavenly Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Guess that's it. Time to go home!

Does it strike you as odd that this gospel seems to admonish ritual fasting and yet here we are about to put ashes on our foreheads? And what about the reading from Isaiah in which the LORD says, "Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is this the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?" If ashes seem to be a no-go then why Ash Wednesday?

Well, as it usually is with Jesus, what's important here is not what's on the outside, but what's on the inside. Both the gospel and Isaiah admonish people who are fasting, (or giving, or praying) in order to be seen by others. In Isaiah, the people of Israel cry out to God, "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" In the gospel, the hypocrites do their ostentatious acts of piety while drawing attention to themselves. Both want to be seen as holy, either by God or by other people. They want to be given credit for the ritual alone. They want to check the box and get the glory.

Well, if that's what they want, Jesus says, then that's what they'll get. But there is a better, deeper way, which Jesus and Isaiah both point to.

"Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,

to undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free,

and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,

and bring the homeless poor into your house;

when you see the naked, to cover them,

and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

There is a deeper fast to be had; there are yokes to be broken and bread to be shared, and clothes to be given. But in order to do that work, we must acknowledge our own sin and fault, our own complicity in those bonds and yokes. Only then will we be called “repairers of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.”

And so here we are, to begin this season of Lent with fasting and prayer, lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wickedness, not to be seen by others, but to take a look at ourselves and ask God’s forgiveness and mercy.

The ashes we will place on our foreheads are not only a sign of lament and repentance. They are also a sign of the one thing we all share in common: our mortality. But again, this need not be a day to wallow in the inevitability of death. Rather, remembering that we dust and to dust we shall return, frees us from the folly of believing we are invincible and it frees us from the injustice of believing that the dust we are made of, is somehow better than the dust that our neighbors, or our enemies, are made of. Today we stand in solidarity with the dust of the world and we see that their hunger is our hunger, their bonds are our bonds, their yokes are our yokes. Today, we acknowledge this truth--that we are no better or no worse than our neighbor and that we are all beloved dust.

That’s the problem with the hypocrites in the gospel. They think that they are somehow better-than, when we know they aren’t. I think that’s why we love to see hypocrisy exposed today. It’s vindicating when someone who pretends to be special, or perfect, or right, is proven to be just the opposite. “What a hypocrite,” we say. “They claim to be fiscally conservative and they pass this budget?” or... “That person has “Peace” and “Coexist” bumper stickers and they just flipped someone off in traffic!” or... “I know that person gave up sweets for Lent and there they are eating a donut at coffee hour! What a hypocrite!”

We know that the word hypocrite means someone who says one thing and does another. Someone who doesn’t practice what they preach. But did you know that the origins of the word come from the Greco-Roman theatre? A hypocrite was the term for a stage actor who used various masks in order to act like the character they were playing. By using different masks they could be seen as something they were not. At the time, there was no negative connotation but it didn’t take long for the word to come mean what it does today. But whether it’s religious, or political, or personal, the usual kind of hypocrisy is really the same as the Greco-Roman acting kind--both are appearing to be a thing they are not in order to be seen by others.

The irony is that, then as now, we celebritize actors and judge hypocrites. Jesus warns against hypocrites not because they inevitably fall short and sin, but because they perform

religious rituals in order to be seen by others, to impress people with their holiness and piety. In other words, it comes back to what's in their heart. But as we know well, what's in our hearts can often be the same pride, selfishness, and vanity as those hypocrites we love to judge.

It is no accident therefore, that we will read/sing Psalm 51 while we receive our ritual sign of penitence and mortality... "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." We cannot clean our own hearts. We cannot renew a right spirit within ourselves. Only the love and grace of God can do that. The ultimate example of that love is Jesus's death on the cross, his ultimate sacrifice and glorious resurrection which redeemed us from our sin and brought us into a new relationship with God.

These next forty days are a time of preparation, a time to look at ourselves and ask God to do for us that which we cannot do for ourselves. These next forty days are a time of preparation, so that we might be ready to journey with Jesus during Holy Week--from the triumphal entry of Palm Sunday to the servant leadership of Maundy Thursday, from the sacrificial love of Good Friday, to the solemn sanctity of Holy Saturday, and finally to the overwhelming joy of Easter Sunday.

We prepare for this journey by giving up things which get in the way of our relationships with God and neighbor, or by taking on things which might aid and strengthen those relationships. Those things don't sanctify us in themselves. Rather our Lenten disciplines clear the way for the Holy Spirit to renew and strengthen one day at a time. Giving up chocolate is great, but one practice which I commend to you is to pray through the book of Lent Reflections by St. Paul's parishioners which has been lovingly compiled and distributed by Robyn and Bob Cotton. The entry for today, Ash Wednesday, written by Maeve Blackman, is a wonderful reflection on the meaning of this holy day and I would like to close with it.

[See reflection in Lenten booklet]