

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
Ash Wednesday

March 2, 2022
St. Francis Episcopal Church, Stamford, CT

“Do You Do Catholics?”

The holy gospel according to Matthew. Glory to you, O Lord.

[Jesus said to the disciples] Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

And whenever you pray, 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. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. *The gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.*

Dear hearers of God’s Word, grace and peace to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last year, we did “Ashes to Go” at St. John’s for the first time. For designated hours in the early morning, at noon, and during late afternoon, those traveling down busy Newfield Avenue could pull into the circle drive in front of the church to receive the imposition of ashes, all without getting out of their vehicles. I was surprised by how many people stopped by – a few of our members, but many people from the community.

I remember one car in particular. The driver rolled down his window and asked, “Do you do Catholics?”

Now that’s a dangerous question to ask someone like me. I could have said,

“Hells bells, we even ‘do’ Baptists.”

Or, “We do Catholics, provided you acknowledge that Martin Luther was right!”

Or, . . . well, I have a few others, but I probably ought to stop right here.

“Do you do Catholics?”

And I said, “Yes, we do Catholics, too.”

But what I perhaps should have said was:

Are you mortal? That is, are you going to die?

And do you admit that you are completely dependent upon the God who created you?
If you answer “yes,” then receive this ashen cross, “Remember that you
are dust and to dust you shall return.”

On Ash Wednesday, we read the same passage from the Sermon on the Mount every year, because for centuries Christians have included the practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving as part of their spiritual discipline during the season of Lent – those exact things that Jesus emphasizes in his unsettling rebuke. Apparently Jesus is concerned about prayers that show-off the one praying, and giving that requires significant recognition of the giver, and fasting such that everyone will notice just how pious, food-abstaining the believer is.

The danger of hearing this Gospel is that, for the most part, we don’t do the things it describes. We hear this scripture and feel utter relief because it doesn’t apply to us at all. We don’t flaunt our piety, and we rarely broadcast our attempts at holiness.

- In fact, most of do an excellent job of hiding from others the fact that we believe in Jesus. Oh, we might pray occasionally in a restaurant, but we keep it short and sweet and most likely silent.
- We don’t make a production of putting our offerings in the plate; many of us go to great lengths to keep our giving secret. In fact, online giving means we don’t even need an offering plate at all.
- And fasting? Really? Giving up chocolate or wine dinner during Lent isn’t even close!

The only conundrum we might have is to receive ashes on Ash Wednesday and then go to work or school, swing by the grocery store, go out for a bite to eat, all the while sporting a smudged cross on our foreheads . . . that’s hardly expressing our piety in secret as Jesus commands. But other than that, we can heave a sigh of relief because we don’t flaunt our faith in the way Jesus describes.

Perhaps the problem now isn’t that we desire to display our piety before others, but that we insist on taking that which is religious and making it one more thing we try to control, like our image, our future, our life. If we do anything by way of spiritual discipline, it’s so that we can try to be more faithful, so that we can attempt to improve our relationship with God, or so that we can manage even our spiritual lives. You see, we can use our spiritual practices as one more grinding attempt to secure our spiritual life on our own terms, instead of Lenten disciplines which remind us of our vulnerability without God.

And so when I receive the mark of the cross on my forehead, and when I hear the words, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return,” it is an admission that I’m *not* really in control of anything, especially when it comes to my relationship with God. I am of the earth and will return to the earth. It was God who breathed into that part of the earth that is me, and it is only by God’s life-giving wind that I am sustained and renewed in this life. And when the earth reclaims me and I return to its dust, it is only by the breath of the resurrected Christ that I will know life again.

And so the ashes place our spiritual practices into the context of our utter dependence upon God. Even in our spiritual practices – those helpful things that we do to nurture our faith lives – it is God who renews and gives life, not our efforts to achieve a heightened spirituality.

The man who asked me, “Do you do Catholics?” brings back a few memories laced with irony. When I was a boy growing up in a small Montana congregation, we faithfully worshiped on Ash Wednesday, but no ashes were included in the service. Around the time I was in seminary, there was a liturgical renewal movement sweeping through the Lutheran church, and clergy were encouraged to introduce the practice of imposing ashes on Ash Wednesday. So, I was part of introducing ashes at my internship church in Oregon, at the congregation of my first call in Bozeman, Montana, and at the congregation I served in Chicago. In all three settings, when we talked about ashes on Ash Wednesday – without ashes, I’m not sure how you can call it Ash Wednesday – in all three, there was opposition because . . . it was too Catholic!

“Do you do Catholics?” Well, yes, because it is the whole church that comes before God, receives the ashes, and confesses that we are dust and to dust we shall return.

As a clergy person, I’ve etched ashen crosses on the foreheads of thousands over the course of my ministerial career. As I say the words, “Remember that you are dust,” I am aware that some will return to the dust sooner than others – typically those who are older, but one never knows. Last week, I phoned Dorthy Anderson in Wisconsin to wish her Happy Birthday; she turned 107. and if I were still her pastor, I know it would be hard emotionally if I had to mark a cross on her forehead. But Dorthy would be the first to admit her utter dependence upon God – perhaps her fragile, diminished body (but sharp mind) gives her an insight about dependency that escapes the rest of us.

So we receive ashes, trusting in nothing but God’s grace. You see, even in our spiritual discipline,

we don’t have to cobble together a meaningful life.

We don’t have to fret over our limitations.

We don’t have to display our spiritual acumen or make sure our religious reputation glimmers.

We don’t have to wonder if we’ve done enough in God’s eyes. . . .

We can simply surrender. We can let go of everything – our bodies, our guilt and shame, our successes and failures, our futures, our reputations, our vulnerabilities, our attempts to improve ourselves, and even our spirituality – all of ourselves. All of it, we give over to the God who loves us beyond measure. That’s what the ashes are about – letting go and standing before God in our naked humanity and knowing that we are embraced by amazing grace.

As one writer puts it, “The power of Lenten disciplines is not that they summon us to double down on self-effort but just the opposite. Lent invites us to embrace the truth that we all exist in the terrifying, beautiful predicament of being absolutely in the hands of divine mercy.”¹

¹ The above two paragraphs are quoted/revised from “March 6 – Ash Wednesday.” by Winn Collier. “Living the Word.” *The Christian Century*. June 29, 2019.

And we who are dust, who return to dust, will one day have these words spoken over us, “In the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend you to Almighty God, and we commitment you into our Lord’s hands: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”

Most of us year the earth, ashes, and dust part of the graveside rite. But those who grasp utter dependence upon God and who are willing to lean into God’s mercy, will also hear, “In the sure and certain hope.” We are dust in the sure and certain hope of God’s resurrection power in Jesus.

Midwest humorist Garrison Keillor, best known for stories about the fictitious Lake Wobegon, recently wrote about Lent:²

In church a couple weeks ago, someone mentioned a course to help us on our spiritual journey during Lent, and the term “spiritual journey” is one of those clichés that clicks my OFF switch. I am not on a journey, I’m simply crossing the street watching the WALK sign click off the seconds, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, as I think about being run over and killed and I arrive on the other side with two seconds to spare. The story of my life. I’m a lucky man.

With all due respect to Garrison, we begin our “Lenten journey” – whether walking across the street or deeply pondering matters of faith – we begin our “Lenten journey” in the posture of repentance, humility, and dependence upon God, the posture from which we engage in spiritual disciplines.

We receive the ashes as the first step of Lent to see all over again that God’s love is on full display on the cross and at the empty tomb, which is our “sure and certain hope” for we who are dust, for we who will return to dust.

“Do you do Catholics?”
You know we do. And me, too, . . . and all of you.

Amen.

Pastor Duane Pederson

² “I’m done with regret, thinking about bagel.” Garrison Keillor. The Column: 02.24.22. February 25, 2022. [I'm done with regret, thinking about bagel \(substack.com\)](https://www.substack.com/p/i-m-done-with-regret-thinking-about-bagel)