

Ash Wednesday 2020

Unlike Christmas or Independence Day, which fall predictably on the same date each year, Ash Wednesday is a day all over the map. Sometimes in February, sometimes in March, it is an interruption to our regularly scheduled program.

It's also an unwelcome reminder of an unpleasant fact. "Dust we are and to dust we shall return." And this unique and somewhat startling service we hold today is meant to be a reminder of that rather unpleasant truth. It is also the first step on the road to recovery. And that first step requires a change of perspective.

In today's passage Jesus sends us a message — stop doing things for show — do them because you mean them. He said, "*And whenever you ... fill in the blank with give alms, pray or fast ... so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward*" (Matthew 6:5).

Jesus uses the word *hypocrites* (hypocrite), which is actually the Greek word for "actor," in the ancient world of theater. Outdoor Greek theaters seated tens of thousands of people, and the acoustics were nothing short of amazing. Even today tourists sit in the far reaches of the stadium seating while tour guides crumble pieces of paper on stage. The tourists can hear the crumbling throughout the vast expanse of the theaters.

Although the acoustics were fantastic, the actors stood far away from the audiences. As a result, it was not possible to see their facial expressions, so they wore very tall masks that exaggerated human features so that everyone near and far could see the emotion the actor was supposed to be projecting. The *hypocrites* wore masks as a matter of course. Makes good sense for actors — actors are supposed to project an emotion so clearly that everyone can see it.

But Jesus warns us about doing so in our daily lives as a show. He's not saying don't be real or show emotion. What He's saying is "don't just act life."

*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 (hypocrites – actors) 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. — Matthew 6:1-2*

Give? Sure. Give! Give to God. Give to help others. Give because it is good and right and even righteous. However, do not give because it may help your standing in the community or because someone will notice you and give you praise or honor! Such giving as that turns a self-less act into a self-ish one.

Going on Jesus says:

*And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites (hypocrites – actors); 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. — Matthew 6:5-6*

We're not talking about praying aloud in church. It's appropriate to pray aloud in church. Unless you are maybe Quaker, it's expected that some will pray aloud in church. But it's not a show! It's not for entertainment, as with the Greek actors and it's not for putting oneself on display. Such display is what Jesus is talking about.

Jesus is clear about being “showy” in public. Unless you are part of some street revival, if you’re standing on the street corner praying in public, you’re definitely showing off. And I must say, I’m not at all worried about any Episcopalian I know doing this. Shoot. They’ll hardly pray aloud in church!

Now there may be some legitimate street or tent revival going on somewhere in a relatively public place where it would be appropriate. In fact, there’s a “new thing” that started several years ago on Ash Wednesday called “ashes to go”. Episcopal clergy, usually vested, go out onto the street near their church, obviously an urban one, and give folks ashes while they are walking by or maybe stopped at a light. I have friends, or at least acquaintances, who do this, and they are so excited about it they can hardly stand it. “It’s taking Jesus into the streets, into the marketplace,” they say. I say, “you know, that’s EXACTLY what Jesus is saying don’t do on Ash Wednesday in this text in Matthew. My friends and acquaintances did not like it when I pointed this out to them.

My friends say, “But people get ashes for Ash Wednesday. To which I say, “Sure, people get ashes. What they don’t get is: scripture, sermon, prayer, contemplation of our mortality for which the ashes are the reminder. The ashes are a sign to help us recognize and remember our mortality, understand the danger of our hypocrisy, and be reminded of the need to live not just for ourselves but in relationship with our heavenly Father. They are a sign, but a meaningless sign if they have no context in which to serve as a sign. In fact, ashes to go is just pietistic showing off in public to which Jesus clearly says, “**DON’T!**”

Finally, Jesus gives us a needed, even welcome reminder. When He tells us to lay up for ourselves treasure in heaven, where neither moth nor rust corrupt, and where thieves do not break in and steal, He is reminding us that there is a worthwhile reason for turning away from the world’s temptations. There is something better!

The 1966 film *The Trouble With Angels*, featuring Hayley Mills and Rosalind Russell chronicles a call to ministry, demonstrating the way God seeks out — and claims — the least likely. Set in an all girls’ boarding school, it centers around a headstrong, young girl named Mary Clancy who’s out to prove she’s tougher than all the teachers and Mother Superior combined.

Time and time again Mary Clancy clashes with the Mother Superior, and by her final year at the school it’s not clear who is winning. However, one night, Mary Clancy watches as Mother Superior rescues an ill-fated student who is simply unable to complete a sewing assignment. Working until dawn while the student sleeps, Mother Superior creates a wonderful dress from scratch, while telling Mary about how, as a child, she had worked for one of the finest designers in Paris and dreamed of creating her own line of clothing. Indeed, she admits she probably had the talent for it.

Aghast, Mary asks her how she could have left such a promising career as a fashion designer. The reply: “I found something better.”

Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. This is the heart of Ash Wednesday. No matter how you observe this day, whether you receive ashes on your forehead as a symbol of your mortality and repentance or make it a day of private meditation, engage in a personal fast, or join others in sharing prayer or spiritual disciplines, what matters is that today you begin a journey for Jesus and with Jesus, in life and then through death and beyond to **resurrection**.

While there’s still time. Amen.