

March 6, 2019

Ash Wednesday/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year C

Primary Text: Mark 6:1-6, 16-21

Secondary Text: Isaiah 58:1-12

Sermon Title: “*The Dirty Business of Discipleship*”

Theme

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus commends almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, but emphasizes that spiritual devotion must not be done for show.

Text

[Jesus said to the disciples:] ¹“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.

²“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. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵“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. ⁶But 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.

¹⁶“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. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so 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.

¹⁹“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Sermon

The Imposition of Ashes is dirty business. The ashes we use are made from the palms used on Palm Sunday. I have only cooked up palm ash once in my years of ministry because even a little lasts a long time. I add a little chrism oil to the ash to make it a little stickier and darker, but a little goes a long way, and as you can see by looking around, a little makes a pretty good impact.

Yes, the imposition of ashes is dirty business. Sr. Pat and I started this morning at 6:00 AM and by 6:15 my right thumb, the digit I use, is stained with the ash. Countless washings will not remove it all. And if years past is any pattern, I will have to wash my alb after this evening's service.

Yes, the Imposition of Ashes is dirty business – just like our sin.

We begin our Lenten journey with confession, because as it says in Psalm 51, "I know my offenses and my sin is ever before me." Like the stain on my right thumb, I cannot simply wash it away on my own.

With regard to my sin, our sin, something else will have to be done. Sin is so abhorrent to the LORD our God that God cannot bear to look at us, but that scuttles the plan God has to gather us all to live with him in eternity. Yes, Something else will have to be done.

The voice of the First Reading from Isaiah is God's, and God was angry as he gave instructions to the Prophet to deliver to the people.

The Israelites were obviously not very sincere in the living out of their godly lives, because back and forth the LORD went with his argument. Please open your bulletin to page 7 and 8 and follow along as I paraphrase or quote in summary:

In Verses 2-3 – You seek me and wonder why you don't sense my presence. "What's the use of these burdensome laws and ordinances?" you ask.

Verses 3-4 – You self-serving ingrates. Your only interest is serving your own needs and then you expect me to honor your thoughtless religious routines?

Verse 5 – This empty piety is not what I ask. I will not honor your effort.

Verse 6-7 - ⁶Is 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?

Verse 8-9 – Do this, and I will once again be your LORD.

Verses 9b-12 – If you live out social justice

Then you will experience all the benefits of being my beloved chosen people.

I've said it before, let me say it again, the godly life practiced well is hard and requires more than doing acts of piety; it requires what the OT Prophet Joel called 'rending our hearts and not our clothing' – you see, the ancient Israelites would sit in ashes and tear their clothes as demonstrations of their humility. But that according to the Prophet Isaiah, would just be yet another empty pietistic gesture.

The LORD created us just as we are, full of potential to choose to live a godly life in response to all that the LORD has already done for us out of love. We should *choose* to live godly lives, but that is the rub isn't it? We often don't *choose* to.

It's not as if we don't know better, the theme of Ash Wednesday is always the same – this is the 59th Ash Wednesday of my life; the 22nd Ash Wednesday of my vocation as pastor. The emphasis is always the same; variations of *Return to the LORD your God*. And indeed, Ash Wednesday is that one time a year that we get jolted out of our routine to return to our rightful place in God's order of things.

It is like restarting my computer when I get it so messed up and I can't figure out what to do and it surely doesn't know what I want to do either. So I *reboot* the

computer, as it is called, and when it comes up, all the mistakes I made are gone and I get to try again fresh and new.

That is how it is with us and our attempts at godly living with God in God's creation. On Ash Wednesday we hear what God's solution is to our lives so messed up we can't figure them out; it is a reboot for our spiritual lives.

You heard what Isaiah was told to tell us. Jesus said similar things but in a kinder way. Jesus said that "practicing piety" in and of itself is not the problem. Practicing piety might be another way of saying performing spiritual disciplines. It is exactly what we are supposed to be doing, but as with the First Reading from Isaiah, it is the condition of the heart that God is interested in. And that might just cause us to get down and dirty

In Jesus' day the poor begged for alms, cash, at the city gates from those coming and going in and out of the city. They couldn't be missed. And in those days, without a social or governmental safety net, it was the only way some survived. Notice that Jesus does not criticize the beggar. In many cases, their condition or situation was not their fault. Jesus' criticism was reserved for the average able Jew. It is their responsibility, as they live out their godly lives, to give alms.

What does that mean for us? I think things are different now – we could argue that at a different time. We, as a church and I as your pastor representing you give help more often than you know. And we should. We live blessed lives, and have the means to share, and we should. But we are not to do it arrogantly but humbly, not making a big deal of what we do either individually or corporately as a church. And more specifically, when I give out any assistance I take time to hear the story, because sometimes, money is not what is needed even when the person asking thinks so, and I/we can offer more appropriate assistance.

Jesus also warned about praying in public as a public display of one's piety. Apparently there were those uber-religious in his day that made a big display of their reverence in prayer. I really don't know that I see anything like this today. But I can tell you ambush evangelism does not work. Engaging people in conversation when the subject of spiritual concerns seems appropriate is better received.

Fasting was another form of piety popular in Jesus' day, but he said that if the person fasting walked around looking terrible so that they attract attention to themselves, then they have received the reward of the recognition of others – but not God. Rather, if fasting is a spiritual discipline you choose, do it and keep it to yourself and God. And the same can be said with how much you contribute to the offering plate or to the work of ministry in its many forms. Do it for pure godly reasons – not for show.

I have chosen to entitle this sermon, "The Dirty Business of Discipleship" because we should expect that often times the genuine spiritual disciples and acts of piety will *not* be done at church by the pastor, but by *you and me out there* in the mission field. We may get our hands or our clothes dirty, we may inconvenience ourselves and our lives, our efforts may never get noticed, but when we help others it's like helping Christ, and it pleases God when we act like his son, especially when we think no one is looking.

Yes, being a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ can be dirty business – when we do it right.

Tonight I will take my alb home and wash it. In a day or two, with enough washings and using my right thumb in daily life, I will eventually lose the stain.

The same can be said of my sin. There is nothing I can do about it this side of eternity. Having ashes imposed will not remove our sin – in fact it is just the opposite, it is a reminder of our sin. No amount of almsgiving or good deeds or spiritual disciplines performed will get it done either.

Lent is a good time to redouble our efforts to avoid sin, to shed some bad habits, but more importantly, it is a good time to draw closer to God by adding spiritual disciplines to our lives – not so that we get a spiritual star on our spiritual charts – no such thing exists - but out of love and devotion and thanksgiving for the forgiveness of our sin through the cross of Jesus Christ my Lord.