

## Ash Wednesday 2017

### *Matthew 6:1-6,16-21*

*Jesus said, "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."*

"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."

Throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus criticizing the Pharisees and their outward expressions of piety; and we see the Pharisees criticizing Jesus and his Disciples for NOT observing these outward expressions of piety. We know, for instance, how often Jesus is criticized by the Pharisees for healing on the Sabbath, and his disciples are criticized for such things as picking grain on the Sabbath. (Matt. 12:1) At one point, the Pharisees ask Jesus, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat." (Matt. 15:2) To which Jesus responds, "You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said: 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me... out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. **These** are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.'" *Matthew 15:7-20 (NRSV)*

Now, it is easy for us to ignore some of these teachings of Jesus about outward expressions of piety because *we* no longer outwardly express **our** piety in the ways that the Jews of Jesus' day did. We don't have religious laws about washing our hands. And while some Christians like the Seventh Day Adventists still observe the practice of not working on the Sabbath (which for them is still

Saturday), most Christians today don't think that working on the Sabbath makes you a bad Christian.

But that doesn't mean that there aren't ways *we* express **our** Christian piety outwardly in America today – and sometimes we make a big deal of it! For decades, politicians running for office cannot get the evangelical vote unless they are **seen** outwardly praying with prominent evangelical leaders. Yet this seems to have little correlation with whether their *policies*, once they are in office, will reflect Christian teachings and values. Fights have been fought in the not-too-distant past about displaying the 10 Commandments or a nativity scene on public property, or having a “Christmas Pageant” in public schools, as was done when many of us were kids. Avowedly “good Christians” often forget about Jesus’ teaching against anger (which was our Sunday Gospel a few weeks ago) and get furious with the “heathen non-believers” who don’t support nativity scenes or 10 commandments on public property or prayer in public schools. At times these very same Christians turn a blind eye to Jesus’ clear commandments about caring for the poor, the stranger, the hungry, those in prison, and the outcast. More recently, a big deal has been made about saying “Merry Christmas!” instead of “Happy Holidays!” There have been serious boycotts by self-proclaimed Christians of certain stores because management had instructed their employees to greet customers with “Happy Holidays!” Again, some of these same boycotting “Christians” turn a blind eye to the poor, the stranger, the refugee, and the outcast – Jesus’ **actual** teaching and example. For *nowhere* in the Gospels does Jesus command, “Thou shalt say ‘Merry Christmas’” or “Thou shalt construct the 10 Commandments and nativity scenes on courthouse lawns” or “Thou shalt engrave ‘In God We Trust’ on thy currency” – all of which are **modern**-day equivalents of the ritual washing of hands before eating and picking grain or healing on the Sabbath in Jesus’ day. On the contrary; Jesus clearly states, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ [or ‘Merry Christmas’] will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who **does** the will of my Father in heaven.” *Matthew 7:21 (NRSV)*

Now, many of us express our faith outwardly in some way. Some wear crosses around their necks (or on their rings, as I do), or put crosses or fish symbols on their vehicles. Sports players point to heaven after a touchdown or home run or goal. Baseball players cross themselves before entering the batter’s box. Today, **we** have our foreheads marked with ashes. Now, I have no problem with these outward expressions of faith in and of themselves; nor do I think Jesus would. The key lies in the *heart*, which the ancients thought was the seat of our **intentions**. What Jesus says in today’s Gospel is, “Beware of practicing your piety before others *in order to be seen by them.*” If we decide to wear our ashes all day rather than wash them off, what is our *intention* in doing so? To be seen by others as pious? To prove to our own selves that we are good Christians? To be witnesses of the good news of Jesus to others? We are indeed called to be witnesses, to be sure; and perhaps wearing our ashen crosses will cause someone to take notice in a good way; **or** perhaps, in our modern climate of skepticism

toward Christianity, it will be seen by others as an outward display of hypocritical, “in-your-face” piety. Who knows? I do think that a far **stronger** witness is, as Jesus says, to “**do** the will of my Father in heaven.” Caring for the poor, the outcast, the refugee, the imprisoned, the hungry, the homeless... *this* is the witness that both Joel in our Old Testament (“rend your hearts and not your clothing”) and Jesus in our Gospel say **really** counts.

Peyton Manning, in a book he co-authored with his father Archie, wrote: “Some [football] players get more vocal about [their faith]—the Reggie Whites, for example—and some point to Heaven after scoring a touchdown and praise God after games. I have no problem with that. But I don’t do it, and I don’t think it makes me any less a Christian. I just want my *actions* to speak louder...”

Father Thomas Keating, in speaking about the practice of Centering Prayer, says that Centering Prayer is not about *attention* but *intention*. That is the distinction that Jesus is drawing in our Gospel. He does not criticize outward expressions of piety *per se*; just outward expressions of piety *done in order to be seen by others*. So *whatever* discipline you choose to follow this Lent, what is your **intention** in following that discipline? Is it to make yourself feel or appear more pious? to have a warm feeling inside? or to be open and vulnerable in the deepest part of yourself to being transformed by the Spirit of God? For it is transformation that is the proper intention for our outward practices.

What is the *intention* of your heart this Lent? If we could meditate on that question, in the light of today’s Scripture readings, I think would be well on our way to making a good start toward a Holy and transformative Lent.

AMEN